



II

**Magic Knight
of the Old Ways**

Taro Hitsuji
Illustrated by
Asagi Tosaka





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“I will become
a knight!”

*Magic Knight
of the Old Ways*

“A warrior living by the rules of the past”



A Knight Tells Only the Truth

Their Bravery Glimmers in Their Hearts

Their Swords Defend the Defenseless

Their Power Sustains Virtue

And Their Anger... Destroys Evil



Alvin

The prince of Calvania. Alvin trains under Sid to become a knight and inherit the throne to save her declining kingdom.



Sid

A man known as the strongest knight of the legendary era. Now resurrected in the present day, Sid mentors the collection of misfits known as the Blitze class.



Isabella

A half-human, half-fairy woman. Due to an ancient pact, Isabella offers her divine protection to the Calvania royal family and assists them as the leader of the Ladies of the Lake.



Tenko

A girl of the demi-human species called the noble-tailed people. Tenko was found by Alvin's father and grew up like a sister to Alvin.

STUDENTS

Christopher

A boy from a farming family in a rural borderlands village. Christopher excels in a strength-focused fighting style where he acts as a shield for his allies.

Elaine

A girl from a prestigious aristocratic family headed by a knight. Although Elaine's sword may be of the lowest rank, her book smarts and swordsmanship are some of the best in the school.

Theodore

A boy from an orphanage in an impoverished area. At odds with his seemingly intelligent appearance, Theodore is quite the delinquent and is skilled at pickpocketing.

Lynette

The eldest daughter of an aristocratic family that fell into ruin. An animal lover, Lynette is the most skilled horseback rider in the whole Blitze class.

KEY TERMS

Fairy Swords

Friendly fairies known as Good Fellows, who, in accordance with an ancient pact, have transformed into swords. Knights use these swords to perform all sorts of magical abilities, such as enhancing their physical strength or healing themselves.

Blitze Class

One of the classes at the Calvania Royal Fairy Knight Academy. Prizing liberty and good conscience, the Blitze class emphasizes students' personal beliefs and sense of justice. As the class is newly established, its student culture is hard to define apart from being highly individual. The class is named after the "Barbarian" Sid Blitze.

Calvania Castle and the Fairy World

The Ladies of the Lake and titan artisans combined their ability to build Calvania Castle. The castle serves as the threshold between the material world, where physical creatures like people and animals live, and the fairy world, where immaterial creatures like fairies and monsters live.

Prologue: The Setting Sun of Days Gone By

Tenkagekoku was the home of the noble-tailed people, a race of proud fox demi-humans, also known as Cerians. It was a small country in the eastern region of the Alfeed continent. It was blessed by nature, and generations of wise rulers developed its own unique culture. I, Tenko Amatsuki, was the daughter of a family of warriors, who protected our great country and its rulers. Under the tutelage of my mother, Tenki, who was touted as the strongest swordsman in Tenkagekoku, I had already shown talent as a swordsman—even though I was only five years old. That's why I never doubted that I would become a great soldier like my mother and protect the emperor and my country. However, my childish confidence and pride were completely shattered the day a large force of dark knights from the Dark Order of Opus invaded our peaceful country.

The sounds of screaming, angry bellowing, and people in their death throes filled the flaming palace, along with sounds of random sword fighting, flesh being cut, and bones breaking. Blood was spilled over and over again like countless blooming red flowers. The bodies of my people were strewn about. In front of my eyes, death became a swirling black storm of atrocity, and that storm took the shape of a knight clad in black armor and a black cloak. I'll never forget the cross-shaped mark on the knight's helmet. The knight was overflowing with dark mana, and their very presence made it hard to breathe. They were like a whirlwind the way they swung their fearsome longsword, and each stroke reaped the lives of my people. Everyone who protected the palace of the emperor was a strong and proud noble-tail. I idolized them, and they were what I aimed to become. However, none of them could stand against that one dark knight. They were just tossed around like rag dolls by the knight's longsword. It was like they were trying to contain a raging storm with just their bodies.

"Ah...ah..." I stammered as I gripped my sword and watched. My people were cut down in cold blood as they fought desperately, and I did nothing but tremble as I witnessed it all. Even when their blood splattered on my face, I couldn't even move to wipe it off. By now, the whole palace had become a hellish landscape, set ablaze and burning to the ground in bright red flames. In the distance, I could hear the clamor, shouting, clashing of swords, and soul-splitting screams of the battle between my people and the dark knights. It was a cacophony of slaughter and massacre

and felt like it was all something from another world.

"Ah..." By the time I realized it, I was the only one of my people still alive in that place. They would never speak another word. They sank in pools of blood. Standing at the center of it all was the dark knight, who was looking at me. I instantly felt a dark black killing intent wash over my whole body, and I could feel death beckoning me. From behind the slit in the visor of the helmet with a cross shape etched into it, were eyes as cold as absolute zero glaring at me as if they were sizing me up. That very look shattered my heart and soul into dust. My mother had trained me since I was little, and while I was still a child, I believed I was strong. I intended to dedicate myself to protecting our ruler, and I was proud of that. However, the moment violent death loomed before me, all of my pride and confidence were stripped away.

"No!" I said over and over as I tossed away my katana and fell embarrassingly on my backside, sobbing pathetically while skirting backward. I no longer had a shred of fighting spirit. I was afraid. I was afraid of the black knight and afraid of death. I didn't want to die. Meanwhile, the dark knight calmly walked toward me with their sword raised.

"No! Stay away! Mom! Save me, Mom!" I said, shaking my head and crying like a spoiled child.

Suddenly, something whooshed through the air. A long-haired noble-tail woman dressed in warrior garb sprang from the side, flying through the air and boldly slashing at the dark knight. The dark knight jumped back, dodging her sharp blade as the noble-tail woman landed gracefully and shielded me behind her.

"Tenko! Are you all right?! Thank goodness I found you!"

"M-Mom!" The noble-tailed woman was my mother, Tenki, the strongest warrior in Tenkagekoku—powerful, kind, and a person I respected from the bottom of my heart. The one I wanted to see the most, showing up like that, filled my heart with joy. I remember thinking that as long as my mother was there, it would be all right.

"Mom?" When I took a closer look at my mother, I saw that she was horribly wounded all over her body. The elegant battle garb that I admired so much was in tatters and stained red in several places. My mother was so strong, and the fact that she had been wounded so much made the fear, which I had almost forgotten, once again rear its head.

"It's all right, Tenko! I'll make sure that at least you're safe!" My mother's breath was ragged as she looked at the dark knight and got into a striking stance with her blade still sheathed. It was the technique my mother was most skilled at. When she pulled out her blade, there wasn't anyone who could dodge her attack. This dark knight was done for. However, maybe it was my imagination, but...my mother's hand was shaking. That couldn't be true, though. No one in the world could beat my

mother. As I stared at her, hoping and praying, the dark knight spoke.

“Surrender, Tenki Amatsuki. The royal family that you and your people have so revered are all dead, slain by my hand.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe what the knight was saying. I crawled to my mother’s feet and looked up at her face, hoping she’d deny it. However, the tears that spilled from the corners of her eyes, and her face twisting into that shameful expression, proved the knight’s words were true.

“Tenkagekoku has fallen. You no longer have any reason to fight,” the knight declared as if he were rubbing salt in my mother’s wounds.

“This isn’t the end!” my mother yelled fiercely as she cried. “It’s not over yet! I couldn’t protect anything else, but I will protect this child!” my mother said as her whole body filled with a fierce vigor, and she stepped forward to shield me. However, there was something strange about all of it. For some reason, when I looked at my mother, I wasn’t filled with hope. Instead, the scene was like watching a struggling butterfly caught in a spider’s web.

“Tenko, run! I’ll hold him off, so you just survive!”

“M-Mom...” At that moment, my mother was like a blur as she disappeared and rushed forward. With a quick step and smooth rotation of her hips, she drew her sword like a flowing stream. I had admired and striven to achieve my mother’s technique of drawing her blade with blinding speed. It slid from its scabbard, and with that explosive speed, raced toward the dark knight’s neck in a silver arc. There was no way he could dodge it. No one in the world should have been able to.

However... “Foolish,” the dark knight said, and the next moment, he appeared with a swoosh behind my mother, his back to her and his sword already swung. Normally, after my mother drew her sword and struck, she would be perfectly still. But now her body was like a puppet that just had its strings cut, and her sword fell from her hand. Her chest had been cut open diagonally with a flourish, and blood blossomed from her wound with a cruel beauty to it. She fell over as she vomited blood.

“M-Mother?!” I forgot myself as I rushed to her and clung to her body. It was clear that the wound carved into my mother’s chest was fatal. There was no saving her. “Mom, no! H-Hold on!” All I did was cry and cry. My mother, who was already dying, reached out her trembling hand and touched my cheek.

“I’m sorry, Tenko. I couldn’t protect you. I’m so sorry.”

“No, don’t die! Don’t leave me, Mom!” I didn’t run, and I didn’t fight. I trampled all over my mother’s wish, the wish she risked her life for. All I did was cling to her and continue to cry like a child. Finally, the dark knight stood next to me in my pitiful state and slowly raised his sword.

“Waah?!” Just then, I awoke and sprung up in my bed, screaming. Out

of the corner of my eye, I could see Alvin pull back the hand that she had placed on my forehead, and she let out a small yelp. I was drenched all over from sweating in my sleep. I looked around, feeling my own heartbeat, which was the only thing that was noisy in the silence. I was in my room in the dormitory tower for Blitze class, located on the northeastern part of the lower level of Calvania Castle. Aside from the canopied bed, desk, closet, fireplace, and carpet, there was nothing worth noting. I could see that it was a little dark outside from the barred window in the back of the room. The hands on the mechanical clock in the corner showed it was still early in the morning, before sunrise. Wall-mounted candlesticks installed with magical stones emitted a magical light that faintly illuminated my dimly lit room. After taking a moment to catch my breath, I spoke to Alvin, her eyes fluttering.

“U-Um, Alvin? What are you doing here so early in the morning?” I could see that Alvin was wearing the squire’s uniform for our school, the Calvania Royal Fairy Knight Academy. However, it was still too early for class.

“Tenko, are you okay?” Alvin said, peering at my face with a worried look. “Starting today, you were going to wake up earlier than everyone else and do your own training, right? You asked me to do it with you.”

“Oh...” Alvin’s words caused my hazy thoughts to clear up all at once. “I’m sorry, Alvin! What am I doing?!” I took off my nightwear and rushed to my closet. “I-I’ll get ready right away. Wait just five minu—whoa!” In my rush, my legs got tangled, and I tumbled fantastically on the carpet.

“Ha ha. Relax, Tenko. I’ll wait for you.” Alvin chuckled and reached out to help me up.

“Ugh. I’m sorry for all this.” I felt really embarrassed, so I opened my closet and quickly started to change into my squire uniform.

“Still, Tenko...it looked like you were having some pretty bad dreams again, weren’t you?” Alvin asked somewhat somberly as I slipped my arms through the sleeves of my uniform. “We don’t sleep together anymore like when we were kids, but...do you still dream about that night?”

“Sometimes,” I lied. For some reason, I’d been dreaming about it a lot.

It seemed like the small change in my voice caused Alvin to see right through me, and with a worried look on her face, she said, “I knew it. You’ve been looking kind of tired. You’ve really been pushing yourself with your training, haven’t you? So—”

“I-I’m fine!” I said, raising my voice to cut off Alvin. “I’m going to become a knight! I have to work a lot harder than I already am! You think so too, don’t you, Alvin?!”

“T-That’s... I...” Alvin stammered and then became silent with a complicated look on her face. I kept talking so as to keep Alvin from saying anything more. “It’s fine! I’m fine! Anyway, I finished changing! Come on, let’s go! I’m going to do my best again today! Working hard every day like

this is going to bring me closer to becoming a real knight! Let's go!" I said as I pushed Alvin along. She looked like she had more she wanted to say, and we left my room.

It's true. I have to become a knight. I have to so I can protect this country and protect Alvin. I can't worry about pushing myself a little hard, and I can't whine about it because I'm going to be a knight. Still...

Chapter 1: Growing Students

The sun rose with the break of dawn, and another day began for the Blitze class at the Calvania Royal Fairy Knight Academy. Alvin and her classmates were on the first level of the fairy world, the sunlit sea of trees, the world beyond Calvania Castle. In the midst of the sea of trees, overflowing with greenery and life, Alvin and the rest of the first-year squires for Blitze class were training in a wide, sunlit clearing. They were all breathing heavily with exhaustion and were using their fairy swords to hold themselves up, as they looked like they could fall over at any second.

“Hey now, what’s the matter? Come at me again.” Standing calmly and empty-handed in the center of them was a tough-looking young man with black hair, dark eyes, and a thin yet sturdy frame. It was Sid, the instructor knight of the Blitze class. “Is that it? Is that all you’ve got? No, right? You guys should still be able to do more,” Sid said to Alvin and the others, who were all exhausted around him. He spoke like he was trying to provoke them, but at the same time, he had a gentle look on his face like a kind old man watching over his beloved grandchildren. Sid’s reprimanding made Alvin and the others grit their teeth and raise their heads. Then they rushed and made a move on him all at once.

The first to step within range of Sid was the brown-haired boy, Christopher. With both hands, he swung his large claymore-shaped green fairy sword and boldly slashed at Sid. However, there was no technique whatsoever in his strikes, as he just relied on brute force while swinging his sword recklessly. Sid, of course, was untouched. He simply dodged by leaning back and poking the flat of the sword, throwing off the trajectory of its slash.

“Oh? You should be tired, but you’ve barely lost any of your strength, have you?” Sid said to Christopher as he handled the vicious assault. With a yell, Christopher made an upper, middle, and lower strike in three consecutive blows in pursuit of Sid. “Yep, I knew you could keep your breath longer than anyone else in this class. That’s good. Stamina is the most important ability a knight can have,” Sid said as he smoothly moved his upper body and dodged a large overhead slash by Christopher. He followed up with a counter punch to Christopher’s chest, which was wide open.

“Hmm?” Sid said. The impact hit Christopher, but where Sid’s fist

had caught him in the chest, there were stone plates stuck to him like armor.

“Ha! This is my new green fairy magic, ‘Stone Armor!’”

Christopher yelled triumphantly and raised his big sword toward Sid.

“I see,” Sid said, and as he breathed, he stepped forward a little bit more. Then, with a stomp that shook the earth, Sid thrust his fist forward just five centimeters.

“What?!” Christopher exclaimed as the plates protecting his chest were smashed to dust, and his body was blown backward.

“Your swordsmanship isn’t that great. But you’re pretty tough and have some good defense,” Sid said to the now airborne Christopher. As he was praising him, Sid was attacked from his right by the student with gray pigtails, Elaine, and attacked from the left by the girl with wavy flaxen hair, Lynette.

Elaine let out a battle cry and Lynette nervously said, “H-Here I go!” as they both used their fairy swords to catch Sid in a pincer attack.

“Good teamwork,” Sid said and calmly deflected their attacks with the backs of his hands. Undaunted, Elaine slashed again and stepped even closer to Sid. Her weapon was a blue fairy sword shaped like a bastard sword. She was the daughter of a noble household and had trained from an early age to become a knight. Perhaps because of this, Elaine’s swordsmanship was so refined that the sword skills of someone from a farmer family, like Christopher, couldn’t even compare. With no wasted motion, she swung her sword freely from a mid-level stance. Lynette’s fairy sword, on the other hand, was shaped like a spear. When fighting with a spear, distance was important, and there were many times when her naturally timid nature kept her from stepping closer to her opponent. However, she was well-trained, and her skills were nothing to scoff at. She thrust straight ahead, slashed, spun the shaft, and struck with the butt of her spear. However, the two girls’ attacks didn’t even scratch Sid. He simply shook his body, and their well-coordinated efforts only cut through the air in vain.

“On the other hand, you guys are too by the book,” Sid said.

“We’re just getting started! Heideheiden!” As she slashed at Sid, Elaine spoke in the ancient fairy language, Espirish, to her fairy sword, telling it to conceal her form, and a thick swirling fog was released from the blade. It was the blue fairy magic “Foggy Veil,” and Elaine’s figure dissolved into the mist, completely disappearing from Sid’s sight. Just then, Sid suddenly rolled his body awkwardly sideways and jumped away from the spot to avoid the unexpected attack by the formless Elaine.

“I see. You kept your swordplay by the book when I could see you and then made it more unpredictable when I couldn’t. You’re quite the

clever strategist, Elaine.”

“M-Me too! Retriiffsdansin!” Lynette shouted as she spun her spear and also spoke Espirish to her sword, telling it to make the leaves dance. This was her green fairy magic, “Dance of Leaves,” and out of nowhere, a blizzard of leaves flew through the air and hit Sid.

“Oh, what’s this?” The leaves stuck to Sid’s eyes and skin. They made a constant rustling sound that impaired his senses.

“Now!” Elaine shouted.

“P-Please, Theodore!” Lynette yelled, and they both jumped away, distancing themselves from Sid.

“Yeah, I got it!” Slightly behind them, burning his Will with his red fairy sword—a short sword—at the ready was Theodore, an auburn-haired boy with glasses. Although Theodore boasted some of the best swordsmanship among the first-year squires, the reach on his fairy sword was too short for a fight with Sid, so he had to give up the style of swordplay that he was so proud of. However, he had been training and developing a new fighting style.

“Flaystormalia!” Theodore said in the ancient fairy language, telling his sword to burn it all away in a spinning dance of flame. Theodore swung his sword, releasing a flame from its blade that swirled into a storm and torched the spot where Sid was standing. Waves of heat, sparks of fire, and pillars of flame rose up and struck the sky. It was the red fairy magic “Flame Storm.” In other words, the solution that Theodore had found was giving up on close-range combat, and instead, focusing on supporting with fire power from a long distance away.

“We did it! We finally landed an attack on Sir Sid!” Elaine said, elated.

“B-But don’t you think this was a little too much?!” Lynette said nervously.

“But if we didn’t try this hard, we’d never hit Sir Sid,” Theodore said with a huff and pushed up his glasses.

Suddenly, there came a voice. “No, he’s got a point.” From the side, someone wrapped their arm around Theodore’s shoulder and stood side by side with him. It was Sid, smiling with a mischievous grin. “Though, it’d be more accurate to say you still couldn’t hit me even if you tried this hard.”

“Huh?!”

“Unbelievable.”

“E-Eep! Since when?!” The students’ eyes all went wide at Sid, who had suddenly appeared right beside Theodore.

“Still, that was pretty good the way you used your magic to mess with my senses and hide the timing for when Theodore activated his magic.”

“Damn it! Flays—” Theodore came to his senses the fastest, pointed the tip of his sword at Sid, and began to shout in Espirish.

“Up you go.” Sid launched Theodore into the air with one hand. He landed hard on his back. Sid left him and disappeared into the fog.

“Huh?!” Elaine let out a shriek as Sid seemed to teleport behind her, delivering a chop to the back of her neck. He disappeared again, and Elaine dropped to her knees. Then, in the blink of an eye, he dealt a palm strike to Lynette in her chest. Lynette was blown back spectacularly, tumbling along the ground as she went.

“Theodore has some nice fire power. I’m sure that one day he’ll become the trump card this class needs. Meanwhile, Elaine has the resourcefulness to apply fairy magic effectively, and Lynette’s support magic is pretty nasty if left unchecked. And then there’s...” Sid started to say as he cracked his neck.

“Hyaa!” Alvin, who had been waiting for the right moment, rushed head-on at Sid with a gale of wind around her. Alvin drew back her rapier-shaped fairy sword and then stabbed straight at Sid.

“Really, now?” Sid calmly looked at Alvin and aimed his left palm at her. Alvin’s stab landed right in the center, and Sid’s palm caught the tip of the blade, which was filled with the Will that Alvin had burned with all of her might. At that moment, the tip of the sword and Sid’s palm flickered with sparks of pure white mana. Alvin pulled back the tip of her sword and jumped away, distancing herself from Sid. Then, with a light step, she watched for an opening and held her sword at the ready. For a little while, Sid opened and closed his left hand and gazed at where he received the strike from the rapier. Before long, he grinned.

“Alvin, as I thought, your Will output is a cut above the rest of the class. Having strong Will is a pretty big deal,” Sid said and then finally stopped standing around casually, and for the first time, assumed what seemed to be an actual fighting stance. He crouched halfway down and slightly hunched over. He then stuck his left fist in front of him and held his flat right hand near his chin. “You really do resemble Arthur. He was also the golden child for Will.”

“I resemble my ancestor, the Holy King Arthur?” Alvin echoed Sid’s words, sounding a little happy. However, she looked at Sid sternly. “In other words, I still have a ways to go, right?” Alvin said, but there was no sadness or frustration in her eyes. Instead, there was the quietly burning flame of a pure and noble will to challenge the high wall that stood in front of her.

“Why of course, my lord. I can’t have you being fine with where you’re at right now,” Sid said and gave a satisfied nod as he looked at Alvin. “If you don’t like being told you just resemble him, then try to reach a higher level. One day, show me the peak of your strength as a

knight, so you're not overshadowed by his image."

"You don't need to tell me!" Alvin said and started to breathe deeply with a special rhythm and burned her Will with a strong resolve. Alvin then spread the mana that she generated with all her might to every corner of her body. "I'll have you be my sparring partner today!" Alvin said and went at Sid with everything she had, becoming a blur as she moved like the wind. She stabbed forward, slashed powerfully, fainted, and delivered a furious attack from below. Alvin seemed to be throwing her whole body into her attacks, but Sid nimbly fended off all her strikes.

Meanwhile, Tenko watched them from afar as she ran by herself in heavy metal armor around the field, breathing hard. Tenko wasn't participating in actual combat training with Sid. To be more precise, Sid hadn't allowed her to participate.

Tenko huffed and puffed as she continued to run. As usual, the incredibly heavy armor weighed down her body. Her breathing was becoming gasps, her heart was beating wildly, and a lead-like fatigue clung to her. It was heavy, painful, and grueling. Lately, she had begun to feel heaviness and pain during her training that was different from the weight of her full body armor. It was so heavy that Tenko felt she was going to be crushed by it.

Lately, Alvin and the others are getting further and further ahead of me, Tenko thought. She could see the other students, who had been knocked down into the dirt. They dizzily got up to challenge Sid with all their might. To Tenko, they seemed so far away. *Maybe I'm going to be stuck like this forever.*

The future that she didn't want to imagine, that possibility began to sneak into her heart, which was weakened from exhaustion. Without meaning to, Tenko began to slow down as she ran. Her legs started to give out for a moment from her intense anxiety. However, Tenko slapped her cheeks with both of her hands and furiously shook her head.

"Not yet!" she said, gritting her teeth and straining her legs, which had started to become weak. Then, as she looked firmly ahead, she once again began to run vigorously while gasping for breath. "I'm just not trying hard enough! After all, Sir Sid—master—said so! Anyone can do it!" Tenko said. For now, she would do what she could and take it one step at a time. She wouldn't become impatient, lose heart, or give up. "I'm...going...to become...a knight!" Tenko proclaimed and continued to run by herself.

bells at six in the morning and ended with five bells—with a different pitch—at five in the evening. The day's training was divided into three parts: early-morning training, morning training, and afternoon training. This was the same for all four classes—Durande class, Ortol class, Anthalo class, and Blitze class—however, each class had their own unique style of training. While some classes had a well-balanced curriculum that included both classroom learning and combat training, other classes would spend the day solely on combat training. It all depended on the philosophy of the class and the principles of their instructor knight. After a rigorous day of training was finished, the students had free time after 5 p.m. They would all bathe themselves and clean their weapons in each of their dormitory towers before getting something to eat.

“Oh, it's him! Hey, Alvin! Over here!” After Alvin had bathed and gotten ready in the royal family's palace on the upper level of Calvania Castle, she came to the dining hall in the Fairy Knight Academy section of the lower level. The students of Blitze class were waiting for her at the end of one of the long tables.

“I'm sorry I'm late, everyone,” Alvin said and hurried to take an empty seat. The dining hall boasted a large space that could accommodate every student from the four classes. The inside of the hall was lined with long tables spaced evenly apart, and lit candlesticks were set up as well. Near the ceiling, will-o'-wisps looked pretty as they illuminated the dining hall along with the chandeliers.

“I guess it can't be helped since you're a prince, but you always bathe alone in the palace, right? How about you take a bath with us in the dorm tower sometime?” Christopher said as he sat next to Alvin and slapped her on the back.

“Ha ha ha. Yeah, about that...” Alvin said, mumbling her words.

“Good grief. Commoners don't know anything about court etiquette. There's no way a nobleman like Alvin would share a bath with a commoner,” Elaine said in exasperation as she played with her hair.

“But guys have to bond, you know? I mean, we are allies, right?”

“Yes, you may be in the same class, but Alvin is a member of the royal family. Nobility is always expected to carry themselves appropriately. Even in communal living like this, it is important to properly draw the line so as not to undermine the authority of the royal family,” Elaine said as she pointed her finger.

“P-Please, calm down, you guys,” Alvin said. “Regardless of your status, I understand that socializing is important. But, like I told you before, I don't really want to show too much skin to people.”

“Oh yeah, you did say that you got a pretty bad scar on your back

when you fell off a horse as a kid, didn't you?" Christopher said, and awkwardly scratched his cheek as he remembered.

"That's right. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too. I totally forgot you told us that."

As they were talking, Sid suddenly chimed in. "Ha ha ha. More importantly, how about we hurry up and have dinner? I'm getting hungry," Sid said as he sat at the end of the long table with his legs crossed and his arms folded behind his head. "If you want to do some male bonding so badly, I'll bathe with you."

"What?! N-No, I'd rather not..."

"Why not? Don't be so cold. You're going to hurt my feelings, you know?"

"Why not? Yeah, no, I don't think my confidence as a man could take it," Christopher mumbled as his eyes glazed over. Sid had a puzzled expression on his face. Elaine, on the other hand, realized what Christopher was saying, became silent, and cast her gaze to the ground, her face turning bright red. Lynette was also blushing, but she was glancing sideways at Sid, trying to figure out his expression.

"What's with this mood all of a sudden?" Theodore said, shrugging his shoulders in exasperation. Even though the mood had been soured somewhat, it seemed like the topic had been diverted from Alvin's bathing. For a number of reasons, Alvin had been disguising her gender and was calling herself a prince. Isabella's magic kept Alvin from being easily found out, but as long as she lived together with her fellow students, there was no shortage of problems like this. As such, it was essential that she had someone who knew what was going on in order to support her.

Just now...did he help me out? Alvin thought and took a sideways glance toward Sid, who was as calm and composed as he always was, so it was hard to see his true intentions. Somehow, by just having Sid there, Alvin felt confident and safe. *But wait...* Suddenly, Alvin realized something. Her friend, who would normally be the first to come to her aid during times like this, hadn't said a single word.

"Tenko?" Alvin said and turned to look at Tenko, who was sitting hunched over quietly and staring at the tablecloth. She seemed somewhat spaced out and didn't look quite right. "What's wrong?"

"Oh! It's here!" Suddenly, she was cut off by Christopher, who raised his voice. What he saw was a group of dwarfish creatures about thirty centimeters tall and completely covered in thick brown fur. They were the housekeeping fairies known as Brownies, and they came hopping about with tableware and large platters of food on their heads and began to lay it all out on the long table. Despite their adorable, but somewhat dull, appearance, they prepared dinner quickly and efficiently. After they finished setting the table, the

Brownies all quickly ran off and disappeared as if they were embarrassed to be seen by human eyes.

“Now that dinner’s here, let’s hurry up and eat,” Alvin said, leaving her questioning of Tenko, who seemed off, for another time.

“Oh man. The food of this era is as great as always,” Sid said and fondly wolfed down his meal. He stuffed his cheeks with bread, chewed some meat, and reached out to get a bite of some fruit. Meanwhile, the rest of the Blitze class was silent. “You know, I’ve been wondering for a while...” Sid said to his students as he munched on a sandwich that he made with some rye bread and a piece of meat cut from a large platter of chicken. “You guys really don’t like the cooking here, do you? Why not? Every single day is like a banquet.”

“A banquet? Well, it’s more like...” Alvin trailed off as she looked at the food laid out in front of her. There was a basket piled high with rye bread, but it was all very hard. On a large platter was a huge pile of meat on the bone that was only roasted and seasoned with salt and spices. It wasn’t very good meat, and it was also hard. There was a big pot of cold vegetable and bean soup that was only seasoned with salt. Another platter was filled with grapes, apples, and citrus fruits. If one were to describe it in one word, it would be...

“Our food is a mess. It’s like someone just randomly threw something together,” Alvin said with a smirk, and everyone nodded in silent agreement.

“I mean, if this were only once in a while, this kind of simple food wouldn’t be so bad.”



“But eating it every day is just...” Elaine said.

“They give us so much that just looking at it gives me heartburn,” Lynette added. Apparently, daughters of nobles like her and Elaine couldn’t stand it. They sighed and ate modestly.

“I mean, it sucks. These days, farmers can cook better than this. In fact, I could make something better,” Christopher said, and Theodore silently cut a piece of fruit and brought it to his mouth.

“No way,” Sid said and drained a big bowl of soup in one gulp. The man who didn’t break, even in the face of two thousand phantom knights, had now lost his composure and had a look on his face like he was challenging certain death. “But...this is bread, right? Bread that’s actually made from wheat,” he said.

“Um, isn’t bread normally made from wheat?”

“Besides, there’s meat. Actual beef, pork, and chicken. Proper meat.”

“Um, what’s improper meat?” Alvin asked.

“To begin with, they feed you breakfast, lunch, and dinner—three meals a day without fail, right?”

“They do.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Rather, what kind of eating habits did you have in the past, Sir Sid?” As Sid and Alvin spoke, Sid’s expression was completely serious while all Alvin could do was give a vague smile.

“Still, I wonder if there really isn’t anything that can be done about this,” Christopher grumbled as he took a bite of meat in disgust.

“It’s no use whining about it. Right now, our class is at the lowest level of treatment by the Brownies. If you don’t like it, then we’ll have to get some achievement points, quickly.”

“Achievement points?” Sid said, taking a break from cutting some meat. “Now that you mention it, you guys have been talking about that a bit over the last month. What are those points, anyway?”

“Oh, I haven’t explained it yet, have I? Assignment quests are issued to each class regularly, and we get achievement points based on our results. They’re like a score for each class,” Alvin said and pulled a bag out of her pocket, placed it on the table, and opened it up. A few yellow crystals spilled out from inside.

“I can feel mana coming from them. Are they mana crystals? Is that what achievement points are?” Sid said and picked up a crystal, looking at it with great curiosity.

“Yes,” Alvin said and nodded. “At the Calvania Royal Fairy Knight Academy, these points are very important. For example, many Brownies live in this school, and they take care of many things for us, like preparing our meals, cleaning the dorms and classrooms, and

maintaining our arms. However, when you ask for their assistance and give them these points, it raises the level of the treatment they give you for a certain period of time. For example..." Alvin said and glanced behind her at a table where another class was sitting. Just like earlier, the Brownies had come and were in the middle of preparing dinner, but it was different from before.

"Oh wow. Today the Ortol class is having fresh-baked bread, meat pie, pasta salad, pumpkin stew, and cranberry cake," Christopher said.

"I-It looks so good," Lynette added, and they both looked enviously at the meal being laid out. It was clearly more luxurious than the one given to the Blitze class.

"The hell is that? It looks more like something you'd decorate a room with," said Sid.

"Ha ha ha." Alvin chuckled awkwardly at Sid's out-of-touch sensibilities and continued. "Anyway, other classes will give Brownies achievement points for their work and enjoy a better level of treatment at school."

"Brownies are all about the money. They only really work as much as they're paid to," Christopher said.

"As a new class, we still don't have that many points."

"In other words, we're receiving lesser treatment," Elaine said and then elegantly brought a piece of sliced bread, that was dipped in soup, to her mouth.

"I see. But that doesn't mean you guys have no points at all, right?"

"Right. We received a certain amount at the start of the semester," Alvin said, nodding. "But at this school, achievement points have a lot of other important uses. We have to buy magic supplies and repair our damaged fairy swords and such."

"Hmm, I see. So, to make sure your school life goes smoothly, you can't afford to waste any," Sid said, nodding as he used a ladle to get a refill of soup from the pot.

"Yes. But we're a newly established class. We're not even close to finishing our assignment quests. However, I was prepared for this kind of hardship," Alvin said, but there was no despair or sadness on her face. There was only the expression of someone who was thinking positively as they faced forward and had a single-minded desire to work hard little by little. "For the time being, we'll have to put up with these kinds of meals and divide cleaning and doing the laundry in the dorms amongst ourselves."

"Yeah, that's fine, but let's hurry up and take care of this food," Christopher said, sounding fed up. "I mean, for knights like us, our bodies are an important asset, right? We won't be able to maintain them with food like this."

“He’s right. I don’t like to say this, but it’s not good for your morale to have three meals like this a day,” Elaine said.

“There is a kitchen in the dormitory tower that we can use whenever we want to cook,” Lynette said.

“But everyone is busy every day, so we don’t have time to prepare every meal on our own,” Christopher said. As they all complained about their current situation, Tenko, who had yet to say anything, suddenly spoke up.

“U-Um, in that case, shall I make everyone’s food starting from tomorrow?” Tenko said, and everyone’s gaze shifted to her.

“Tenko?”

“Huh? What’s this all of a sudden?”

“W-Why would you have to do that?” They were all confused by her proposition, but she faced them and continued to speak like she had thought hard about it.

“I-I mean, I’m the one who’s slowing you all down the most, so I should do at least that much,” Tenko said, and the students looked at one another in shock.

“Ha ha ha! Hey, what are you saying, Tenko?”

“You’re slowing us down? Oh, you jest!”

The students all raised their voices as they laughed.

“You’re the strongest one among us!” Christopher said.

“T-That’s right! Your swordsmanship is nothing short of amazing!” Lynette said.

“While I am somewhat confident with the blade, I’ve never beaten you once in a duel,” Elaine said.

“Jeez, give the jokes a rest. When you’re overly modest, it just sounds like you’re being sarcastic,” Theodore said.

“I’m not being modest. It’s the truth,” Tenko said with a cloudy expression. “I mean, I’m the only one who still can’t use Will, right?” When Tenko pointed this out, everyone who had been talking closed their mouths. Will was a technique used by knights of the legendary era to generate their own mana by taking in mana from outside their body and burning it in their soul. According to Sid, if you could pull off this technique, then you could become strong with even a low-level fairy sword. Presently, the goal of Sid’s training was to get his students to be able to use this power freely at their own will.

“T-Tenko...” Alvin was unable to find the words to say to her, but Tenko continued.

“There are some differences in everyone’s skill, but now you can all use Will.”

“Th-That may be so, but...”

“But I’m the only one who can’t do it at all,” Tenko said. Her ears drooped. “I still can’t get a grasp on the sensation of burning Will.”

Maybe it's because I don't have what it takes," Tenko whispered, and Alvin shot up from her chair.

"T-That's not true! You're working harder than anybody else, Tenko! That's why you'll surely be able to use Will soon! You're just in a bit of a rut right now!" Alvin said, but Tenko said nothing back. "Besides, Sir Sid said so! He said that Will isn't some special power, and anybody can use it as long as they're alive! Do you doubt your own master?!"

Tenko's eyes went wide, and she looked at Sid.

Sid was still shoving his face with bread and meat, but he spoke gently. "Yes, that's right. I repeat this a lot, but Will isn't special. If you practice, anyone can use it."

"M-Master..."

"As I've said, the time it takes for someone to awaken their Will varies from person to person, but even when not taking that into account, the students in this class are talented and special," Sid said and poured the last drop of soup from the pot into his empty bowl, gulped it all down, and smiled at Tenko. "Don't worry, apprentice. Trust me."

Relieved by Sid and his powerful smile, Tenko said, "T-That's right!" and nodded like she was trying to shake off the darkness that shrouded her. "I probably just became a little nervous because I was kind of falling behind everyone! But there's still more to come, right?! I'll do my best, so please watch me, master!"

"I sure will. That's the spirit. Oh, and thanks for the meal," Sid said and brought his hands together to give thanks.

"Wait, Sir Sid?!"

"W-When did everything disappear?!"

"D-Did you eat everything that was prepared?!"

"There was so much of everything, though!"

"We were talking, so we barely had anything to eat!"

"Forget barely. I still haven't had anything to eat! Master?!"

Everyone started to get into an uproar, and Sid looked surprised.

"Hmm? You guys kept saying how bad it all was, so I thought you didn't want any dinner today."

"That's not what we meant, instructor!"

"Even if it didn't taste good, I was still hungry!"

"Where in the world did you store that amount of food inside your body?!"

Grudges formed over food could be truly fearsome. The student's looked at Sid with tears and resentment in their eyes, but without flinching, Sid firmly puffed out his chest and said, "'A knight must eat when they can.' It's part of the old ways."

"No, it's not!" Everyone shouted at once, kicked their seats, and

stood up.

“Food is essentially an exchange of life—in other words, a battle. So, if you’re a knight who makes their living through battle, it is only natural that you put all of your heart and soul into the challenges. Even if it means trampling over others to do so.”

“You’re just being greedy!” Sid’s students once again shouted and drew their swords in anger.

“E-Even if you are our instructor, this is the one thing I can’t forgive you for!”

“That’s right! Even if it is you, master, there are some things that you should and shouldn’t do!”

“Typical barbarian! I shall punish you!” Elaine said, and they dove and slashed at Sid all at once.

“Whoa there.” Sid placed his right hand on the table, kicked the floor, did a handstand into a forward somersault, and easily dodged their rageful attack. All the while, he didn’t forget to grab an apple from a student’s plate with his free left hand. “Oh, we’re getting in some after-dinner training. Fine, I’m game,” Sid said as he fearlessly ate the apple on top of the table and riled up his students by beckoning them with his hand.

“That’s not what this is!” his students cried, and with empty stomachs, came at him. As the other classes looked at them in utter disbelief, Blitze class turned into an uproar of screaming and shouting.

“Ha ha ha. Later, let’s all make something to eat for dinner,” Alvin said and smiled as she looked at her friends and Sid. However, Alvin’s expression turned serious as she stared at Tenko. Currently, she was teary-eyed and looked dizzy from hunger as she was jumping at Sid. She looked like she normally did, but lately, Tenko would suddenly look like she had something on her mind. “Tenko’s okay, right?” Alvin said to herself as she looked at Tenko and felt a tinge of anxiety.

Chapter 2: The Interclass Games

The Kingdom of Calvania rested in the center region of the continent of Alfeed. To the far north, beyond the Death Palace Mountains that towered like walls, there was the former demon kingdom of Dachnesia. In this kingdom was an abandoned city sealed in by snow, ice, and the hellishly cold air that blew all year round. In the throne room in Dachnesia Castle, which stood in the center of the city, something was happening. With a loud smash, a girl who appeared to be hysterical threw a crystal ball to the floor, smashing it to pieces. She was a silver-haired girl clad in a gothic dress and wore a crown on her head. Her sapphire-blue eyes were cold but filled with a flame of hatred so intense that it could burn everything in the world to the ground.

“I hate this! I hate this so much!” the girl shouted as she stepped on the broken pieces of the crystal ball over and over again. “Why is it always Alvin?! Why?!” she said and seemed to forget herself as she continued to step on the shards. Then, as she began to lose her breath, a dark shadow appeared behind her.

“Oh my. What’s wrong, my adorable master?” The shadow wriggled and changed shape until what appeared was a devilishly beautiful woman clad in a jet-black hooded robe. It was the great witch and head of the Dark Order of Opus, Flora. “You seem to be in an even worse mood today.”

“Flora?!” The girl with the crown stared knives at Flora, but she only chuckled and brushed it off like a gentle breeze and walked toward her.

“So, what was my adorable master looking at to alleviate her boredom this evening?” Flora said, and with a wave of her hand, quietly spoke something in Espirish. After she did, all shards of the crystal ball started to tremble and before long, started to float into the air by themselves. Then the shards combined on their own and eventually recreated the crystal ball back in perfect condition without a single crack. There was an image of something being projected inside the crystal ball.

“Oh my. This is...Prince Alvin again?” Flora smiled as she saw Alvin displayed inside the crystal ball. “You peek in on the prince every day without fail and talk about how much you want to kill them, my master. But could it be that you actually really like the

prince?" Just then, the castle of Dachnesia shook unsteadily, and a huge crack appeared in Flora's crystal ball.

"How about you watch your mouth? You keep going, and I will kill you," the girl said, and she was holding something unseen before. It was a black rapier. From the blade of the sword, a darkness blacker than shadow rose like embers. In addition, the girl's very presence seemed to have increased tenfold.

"How scary. I'm sorry I spoke out of turn. Please forgive me," Flora said, and without breaking a sweat in front of this demon, Flora smiled and gave a small bow.

"Hmph! You better be sorry!" the girl said and pouted her lips like a spoiled child, looking away and sulking. "I can't forgive anything about Alvin. I hate Alvin. I want to kill Alvin. I won't leave any trace of them, a scrap of their flesh, or even a strand of their hair left in this world."

"Your hatred and resentment are very justified, my lord." Flora stroked the cracked crystal ball, and it was restored once again. Then the girl in the crown pointed hatefully at it.

She could see Alvin and the others working together in the crystal ball. "Because of Alvin, I've lost everything and find myself in this sad state! So why...?!" *Why does Alvin look so happy?!* Is what she started to say before she clenched her teeth. "What's more..." the girl said and once again looked into the crystal ball with gloom in her eyes. Now Sid was shown diligently instructing Alvin. Alvin had a serious expression as she listened to Sid's instruction, but sometimes, for a second, her face would change to a smile, and she'd steal a glance at the side of Sid's face. Seeing Alvin so happy was extremely frustrating to the girl, and it made a pitch-black emotion erupt from the depths of her heart like a geyser. After all, to her, Sid was...

She couldn't take it anymore, so she rushed up to Flora and reached out her hands to try and take the crystal ball.

"Oh, dear," Flora said, and quickly pulled the crystal ball away and protected it from being destroyed a third time.

"What are you doing?! Give me that crystal ball!"

"You can't just take your anger out on the crystal ball of far-sight, my master."

"But! But!" The girl stamped the ground in frustration, trembling as tears welled up in her eyes. "I'm just so frustrated! The plan you worked so hard putting together was ruined because I did something I shouldn't have."

"Master, I explained to you before that it wasn't a problem at all, didn't I?" Flora said like she was nurturing a small child and gently stroked the trembling girl's head. "It's true that it would have been ideal if the plan had resulted in the complete destruction of Calvania

Castle and the royal capital. However, I also accounted for the fact that there would be difficulty regardless of whether Sir Sid resurrected or not.”

“B-But...”

“In the first place, the capital is on ground that is strong with the blessing of Éclair, the Fairy God of Light. If we are to fulfill our wish, we must break it down little by little. Therefore, the fact that we were able to carry out that plan was meaningful in itself. By damaging Éclair’s protection over the royal capital, your power has increased, hasn’t it, my master?”

“Y-Yes it has!”

“Scheming is a humble affair. The little things will add up and eventually bring about the twilight of the country’s destruction and take Prince Alvin by the throat.”

“But when will I be able to take revenge on Alvin?!” the girl shouted, trembling as she squeezed her fists tight and cast her gaze to the ground. Flora’s mouth twisted into a grin as she looked over this young girl. They both had a certain “wish,” and that was why they had set up a base in the extremely cold far north, a land cursed by the ancient demon king. It was a place where no living creature could stay, but they were vigilantly watching for their opportunity to fulfill their wish here. Right now, the girl with the crown was obsessed with Alvin. With a burning desire, she hoped for Alvin’s downfall more than anything else. However, that was a little removed from Flora’s ultimate goal.



That's just fine, Flora thought and made a thin, cold smile that was like an abyss. As Flora hugged the girl and rubbed her back, she thought, *This girl hates Alvin and resents this world with all her heart. And those feelings will eventually burn this world to the ground and freeze it in a frigid winter. Yes...as prophesied.* Even so, while the girl's intense hatred was something Flora hoped for, she couldn't let her be consumed by it. Strong emotions and desires could be a strong driving force to achieving her wish, but they could also become a double-edged sword that could lead the girl to her destruction. As such, her careful management was essential. Sometimes Flora had to calm her rage. Flora thought for a while before speaking up. "If my master really wants to, shall we try going after Alvin?"

"What?! Really?!" The girl immediately looked like a child with sparkling eyes.

"Yes. Your condition has stabilized. Although it will be limited, it is possible for you to be active outside for now. Besides, it is true that we have some spare time before the next 'trick.' And I do think it is a vassal's job to help cure the boredom of their lord. So, let me help my adorable master take a shot at the prince they hate so much."

"Flora!" The foul mood that the girl had earlier completely disappeared, and after quickly changing her tune, she took Flora's hand. "I knew you'd tell me that! I love you, Flora! You're the only one who gets me!"

"You flatter me too much." Flora chuckled.

"All right. So what are we going to do about Alvin? He he he," the girl said with an innocent expression as she jumped onto her throne, crossed her legs, and began to think. However, despite her childlike innocence, she was filled with a cruel darkness. "Killing Alvin with my own hands...is off the table, right?"

"Yes. I don't really recommend it," Flora said, gently rejecting the idea. "Right now, the prince has the strongest knight of the legendary era at their disposal. Even though he's weakened, as long as he's alive, killing the prince won't be an easy task."

"I-I know that! Hmph!"

"Besides..." Flora smiled as cold as ice and whispered into the ear of the girl. "What you really want to do is sink the prince deep into despair before you strangle them to death, right? Killing Alvin just once isn't enough, is it?" Flora said, and the girl's eyes opened wide as she went rigid.

"R-Right!" Then, with a perilous darkness in her voice, she said, "My hatred won't be satisfied with just Alvin's death! I will take everything from them! I'll make them experience despair and humiliation so great they'd rather die! Alvin's sadness shall become a

requiem song for me! That is the only reason I still cling to this world!" The girl peered into the crystal ball intently at Sid and muttered in a low voice, "That's right. I will one day take everything from Alvin. Everything."

Seeing her like this, Flora smiled slightly and continued. "Well then, my master, how shall we go about taking a swing at Prince Alvin this time?"

"Right. Do you have any ideas? Something that will hurt Alvin directly?" The girl reached out and grabbed Flora's crystal ball, bringing it toward herself. She then peered inside of it again. "Oh, who is this girl?" A noble-tail girl with beautiful white hair and long ears grabbed her attention. She was away from Alvin and the others, training all by herself.

"That's Tenko Amatsuki," Flora said as the crowned girl stared. "She is a survivor from Tenkagekoku, which was destroyed ten years ago by our dark knights. She is Alvin's best friend, and they've shared their life together since they were children. For someone with few allies within the palace, a person like her, who unconditionally stays by Alvin's side, must be important. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that she is like Alvin's other half."

"I know all that," the girl responded in a resentful manner. "Hmm? A friend...a best friend?"

"Is something the matter?"

"It's nothing," the girl said, but she looked through the crystal ball at Tenko. She stared so hard, it seemed like she was going to burn a hole right through her. This noble-tailed girl was struggling with something by herself. The girl with the crown continued to stare at her with ice-cold sapphire-blue eyes as if she could see straight to her heart. Eventually, she started to laugh eerily in a low voice.

"Oh dear, my master. What did you see with your magical eye?"

"Oh, I saw something very interesting inside the mind of Tenko Amatsuki," she said and chuckled for a while. Before long, she declared, "I have an idea, Flora."

"Oh my. Whatever could it be?"

"Here's what I'm thinking," the crowned girl said and started to explain her scheme to Flora with the innocence of a child who had come up with a really good prank.

Nove 1st in the Year 1446 of the Fairy Calendar

It was the time of year when the mild weather of autumn was coming to an end, and winter's breath slowly approached. At the Calvania Royal Fairy Knight Academy, there was an event that was

held around this time of year for the first-year squires.

“The interclass games?”

“Yes. Until last year, it was held between the three legacy classes, but from this year on, the Blitze class will be attending, making it four,” Alvin said. Currently, Sid and his students were in a sparsely wooded area known as the Reuzel Plains to the west of the royal capital of Calvania. It was a place used for war games and tournaments—things like close combat and jousting. The areas of competition, which were separated by a number of tents and wooden fences, stretched out before Alvin and the others. Also assembled there were the first-year students, or First Squires, of Durande, Ortol, and Anthalo class, who would be participating in the day’s competition. Not including Alvin and the Blitze class, there were about forty First Squires per class assembled. In other words, a little more than 120 First Squires had gathered.

“The interclass games are held to test the results of the training that we First Squires have been doing for the past six months. Just as the name implies, it also serves as a way for classes to socialize with one another.”

“Oh, I see,” said Sid. “Well, the best way for knights to understand each other and create friendships is to actually cross swords and fight to the death, after all. Yeah, this era gets it.”

“No one’s going to be killing anyone! Nothing that disturbing is going to happen here today, okay?!” Alvin said, jumping right in to cut Sid off.

“Huh? No killing? Even though they’re death games?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?!” Alvin asked.

“I mean, it’s just common sense for knights to try and kill one another as a greeting, isn’t it? Sometimes they’d get so heated that someone would die. It was actually a standard funny story to tell at banquets.”

“Why was the legendary era so violent?!” Alvin asked and then, with a cough, pulled herself together. “Anyway, one-on-one matches between students from different classes are arranged at random by lottery. Then, the students compete against each other with swordplay and fairy magic. Usually, a single person will compete in three matches. Then, among the squires who have won all three of their matches, the one who has shown the most knightly demeanor and decorum will win the Best Newcomer Award, and the class that squire belongs to will receive achievement points.”

“Oh, so you can get some of those achievement points. That’s a good incentive.”

“Though...the result is pretty much decided.”

“What?” Sid asked, tilting his head. Suddenly, the air around them

stirred, and the students of the other classes became abuzz with excitement.

“Oh, it’s her?!”

“It’s Louise! Louise Thedias from Ortol class!” Alvin and the others gazed at the center of the excitement and saw a single girl walking leisurely along the field. With fiery red hair and piercing ultramarine eyes, she exuded an unmistakable air of ambition. While her hair color and appearance conjured up images of flame and passion, she possessed a cool beauty that compelled those who looked at her to stand up straight. There were no flaws in her dashing demeanor. She seemed almost supernatural. On her waist, she wore a twin blades-shaped blue fairy sword called the Azure Stars.

“It’s Louise. She’s class president of the first-year Ortols! She’s the chosen one among us first-years and got an Atzilt-rank sword!”

“According to the rumors, she’s pretty strong, and her abilities are on par with third-year squires...or maybe even regular knights!”

“Atzilt swords are so awesome. I guess this means the Best Newcomer Award is a done deal, huh?”

“Yeah, without a doubt.”

“It must be nice to be chosen by an Atzilt sword. Isn’t it usually royal or ducal families chosen by them?”

“Well, sometimes people who aren’t from those bloodlines get their hands on swords from the divine rank.”

“Yeah, she really is the Chosen One, a real miracle child.”

“I heard that this generation’s heir to the throne, who should have gotten an Atzilt sword, got an Asher.”

“Ha ha. It’s like a reverse miracle.” In response to the whispering and gossiping around her, Alvin smiled bitterly and continued her explanation.

“So, you see what I mean. Every year, the Best Newcomer Award is won by someone with an Atzilt sword. The people who serve as the judges give priority to the divine sword rank, and knights with Atzilt swords are sure to win three matches.”

“Well, that’s just boring. That takes away everyone’s motivation,” Sid said as he looked around. “Though, these other classes do seem pretty motivated, don’t they?” The students from Durande, Ortol, and Anthalo were looking with belligerent expressions and stealing glances at Blitze class as they whispered amongst themselves. “Rather, they seem to hate our class.”

“Um, well you see, the thing is,” Alvin said, fumbling her words.

“Hmph. They hate us,” Theodore said, dismissively snorting his nose as he pushed up his glasses.

“They hate us. Why? What did we do?” Sid asked.

“Seriously, Sir Sid. Don’t you remember that incident in the

capital?"

"Of course. What about it?"

"When the dragon attacked the capital, our class of First Squires was somehow able to face the dragon. In the end, the other classes were unable to do so. When you look at it objectively, we weren't any help, and it was you who defeated the dragon, Sir Sid. However, we were able to fight the dragon as squires. That much is true." Annoyed, Theodore took a glance at the surrounding students, who were looking at them from a distance. "To the citizens of the capital, I'm sure our class looked brave and reliable, the traits of knights who could lead the next generation. All the while, they were disappointed in the cowardice of the three legacy classes. In any case, these guys can't stand a newly formed class of rejects with nothing but Asher-rank swords being held in such high regard by the people. They also can't allow themselves to be looked down upon. That's why they probably want to prove they're superior by totally crushing us and taking away our honor in a public setting like this."

"Are they idiots by any chance?" Sid asked as he looked around and scratched his head, exasperated. "A knight's honor isn't something that can be earned in such a roundabout way."

"Yeah, you're right. But that's what they think, so it can't be helped," Christopher said. He was normally an optimistic and upbeat person, but even he seemed somewhat fed up. "Though, if that's what's going on, then today is going to be hell. Damn it," Christopher said as he buried his head in his hands.

"Y-Yeah, I'm scared," Lynette said, shaking.

"Up until now, we've had a number of mock battles with the other classes, but we got our butts kicked every time," Christopher said.

"Yes, and every time, we were reminded that a difference in sword ranks is something that's absolute," Elaine said with a sigh. "Sir Sid has been teaching us how to use Will, but it hasn't been that long since we started."

"Man, are they going to make a show out of kicking our butts again?" Christopher said.

"This is going to be the day I die. Oh, Father, Mother, brothers, and sisters, please forgive me for dying first and being such a disappointment."

"L-Lynette, don't be so negative!" Alvin interjected, unable to remain silent. "The Ladies of the Lake will set up a ward of death and have healing magic and medicine prepared, so no one's going to die or be incapacitated!" It seemed like her words only made Lynette even more afraid.

"Waah! I want to go home! Mommy!" Lynette cried, having completely lost her nerve.



It wasn't just Lynette. Everyone seemed to be completely nervous, and their expressions became stiff. They likely couldn't avoid imagining the type of horrible things that were going to be done to them by the members of the other classes, who were going to exclusively target them. However, Sir Sid suddenly laughed.

"Sir Sid?"

"Hey, don't get so nervous. Since your safety is guaranteed, these matches are going to be like a game. Don't worry about the results, and just take it easy."

"T-Take it easy?" Lynette said.

"Even if you say that..." Christopher said, and he and Lynette both lowered their gaze, unsure of what to say.

"Sir Sid. Prince Alvin." From behind them, there suddenly came a clear voice. When they turned around, they could see an incredibly beautiful woman with long blue hair walking toward them. It was Isabella, the leader of the Ladies of the Lake, who protected the Kingdom of Calvania and the royal family in accordance with an ancient pact. "I was looking for you two," Isabella said with a chuckle.

"What's up? Do you need something?" Sid said. While Isabella supported Alvin, the heir to the throne, she also served as the principal of the Calvania Royal Fairy Knight Academy. She had been busy today, coordinating the interclass games, and had not been seen since the morning.

"Yes. All of the instructor knights and heads of each class are going to have their final meeting for the interclass games, so please head to tent number one."

"All right, I got you. Let's go, Alvin."

"Okay," Alvin said and followed Sid, who started to walk toward the tent at Isabella's direction. Just then, Alvin saw someone in the corner of her eye. It was Tenko. She was far away from the Blitze class, desperately practicing with her sword. Drawing her blade and slashing, she practiced a graceful dance against an enemy she was picturing in her mind. Her whole body was covered in sweat, and she looked so serious that Alvin was afraid to even call out to her. However, right now Tenko seemed to be pushing herself to the point of anxiety, as if she was in a hurry with no time to spare.

Tenko... Alvin thought and stopped in place as she looked at her.

"Leave her alone for now," Sid said as he patted Alvin on the shoulder and nodded.

"Could you please explain what is going on?" Isabella said, her voice full of annoyance as it echoed throughout the tent where the

final meeting for the interclass games was being held. "I've heard nothing about this matchup or this additional rule. This contrivance was clearly made out of malice, so someone please explain." The tent fell silent under Isabella's somewhat harsh tone. Currently, there were nine people—Isabella and the instructor knight and class head of each of the four classes—at a round table set up inside the tent. Alvin was on pins and needles as she watched the events play out in front of her. Meanwhile, Sid was sitting at her side with his feet propped up on the table and his hands folded behind his head as he looked at everyone, somewhat amused.

"Someone explain," Isabella said as she slammed her hand on a board set up at the back of the tent. On the board, a chart detailed the progression of the matches being held on the eight sections of the arena. "Why are all of the opponents for Blitze class wielders of Beriah-rank fairy swords?! What's more, Prince Alvin's opponent is Louise Thedias, an Atzilt-rank!"

Fairy swords were given a rank. From strongest to weakest: Atzilt, or divine-spirit rank; Beriah, or spirit rank; Yetsera, or majestic-spirit rank; and Asher, or earth-spirit rank. Among them, the most common was Yetsera, used by over eighty percent of all knights. On the other hand, only about ten percent of all knights had Beriah swords, and their possession was considered a sign of being an elite knight. Excluding those from the bloodlines of the three great dukes, who were chosen in accordance with an ancient pact, people chosen by the highest-ranking sword, Atzilt, made up about one percent of all knights. The number of those chosen by the lowest-ranking Asher swords was also small, about five percent. For that reason, those with divine-rank Atzilt swords were praised as "chosen ones," and those with earthly-rank Asher swords were ridiculed as failures and outcasts.

"There are six participants from the Blitze class for this year's interclass games. There is clearly something strange with all six of them having opponents who are Beriah-rank and above!" Isabella exclaimed indignantly. Just then, a young man with a faint smile and a monocle interjected.

"You say that, Lady Isabella. However, these are the results of a strict and fair drawing of lots. In that case, is this not the divine will of Éclair, the fairy god of light?" he said. He was Kreis, the instructor knight for the Ortol class, and standing silently behind him was the head of Ortol class's first-year squires, Louise.

"Such impudence!" Isabella said with disgust and looked around at the other knight instructors. The instructor for Durande class was a large, wild-looking man with a crude smile on his face, and the instructor for Anthalo class was a young woman with a composed

expression. From the look of things, it seemed like they were all in on it. The idea likely came from Kreis himself, as this was the kind of handiwork that was typical of the Ortol Duke faction. They excelled at things like laying groundwork for plots and trickery. "Let's just say that this strange combination is a coincidence. However, I don't agree with this additional rule!" Isabella said and raised her voice as she pursued the issue. "This rule about the loser of each match paying the winner three points is outrageous! This kind of gambling deviates from the original purpose of these games! As the head of this academy, I will not accept it!"

"So you say. However, this is something that we, the head instructors of all of our classes, have carefully discussed and agreed upon," Anthalo class's instructor said.

"That's right. These games have fallen into a rut in recent years. We need to try something new to boost the morale of the students, don't you think?" Durande class's instructor added.

"The students will surely fight harder if they're wagering something as important as achievement points. It will make the matches that much more meaningful."

"Besides, even if we're talking about wagering achievement points, it's only three points per game. It's not much of a cost for any of the classes. Stop complaining."

"I can't believe you all!" Isabella said and clenched her teeth in frustration. It was true that it wouldn't be too much of a burden for each class. That is to say, it wasn't much of a burden for each one of the three legacy classes. However, it was a different story for the newly established Blitze class. Depending on how their matches turned out, their achievement points could be completely depleted. Without achievement points, they would have no way to eat, repair their fairy swords, procure magical items, or even use the various training areas in the castle. In the worst case, they would become unable to perform activities as a class.

"It's fine. As long as they win, it won't be a problem, right? If they win half of their matches, it makes everything even out."

"In the first place, Lady Isabella, while you are the guardian of the royal family, you are also the head of this academy, are you not? I think it would be a good idea for you to not become too overly attached to a particular class of students," Kreis said, and Isabella's shoulders trembled in anger.

"To think you'd be this shameless is appalling!"

One's sword rank was everything. It was true that there were rare times when someone with a lower-ranked fairy sword would defeat someone with a higher-ranked fairy sword through strategy, skill, or experience. However, that was between a single difference in rank,

like a matchup between a Yetsera-rank and a Beriah-rank. If there were more than two rank differences between their swords, the situation would be hopeless. By a deliberate manipulation of the matchups, Alvin and her Asher-rank classmates were all being forced to fight opponents who were two or more sword ranks above them.

No matter how much training they've received from Sir Sid, it won't be enough! Isabella thought. It had only been about a month and a half since Sid had arrived, so it was unthinkable that they'd be much of a match for their opponents. "Do you all want to destroy the Blitze class so badly? Are the three dukes behind this?!"

"Hmph. Who knows? We here at the bottom don't have a clue what those guys at the top are thinking," the head instructor of Durande class said.

"However, aren't you tired of a weakened royal family? What we need in these dark times is a strong and powerful ruler. Don't you agree?" Anthalo's instructor asked.

"Well, setting up the Blitze class was just pointless, and the royal family should learn how to take care of themselves in the future. That's just what I think."

Isabella was unable to say anything back to Kreis and the others, so she once again clenched her teeth. It was school policy that these types of rules were decided by a resolution of the head instructors of each class. Even as the head of the school, it was difficult for her to overturn that. It was a one-sided decision that excluded Sid, who was the head instructor knight of Blitze class, but even if they tried to force that issue and revote with Sid included, they'd just make this same decision again. Also, when making these decisions, they could add points onto the number of votes. If that happened, there was no beating the three legacy classes, who were probably working together behind the scenes. Just as Alvin was thinking that the situation was hopeless, she heard a voice.

Alvin... Suddenly, Isabella's voice was echoing inside of Alvin's head.

Isabella? Alvin thought and raised her face to look at Isabella, who silently stared back. She was likely using a kind of telepathy magic that let her speak directly to other people's minds.

I'm sorry that this happened on my watch. Since it's come to this, one option would be for Blitze class to withdraw from the interclass games, Isabella said, and Alvin gulped upon hearing her regretful suggestion. *They would probably say that your class ran away in fear, but you would avoid the worst possible situation of losing all your achievement points.*

B-But...

Since your class was just established, it's still lacking in many ways. It's very frustrating, but for the sake of the future, I think it would be best

here to—

Just as Isabella was making her suggestion, someone spoke up.

“Good. That’s just fine,” Sid said boldly. In his crude posture, with his legs on the table and his arms folded behind his head, he had his usual fearless smile.

“Oh? What do you mean that’s just fine, Sir Sid?”

“I mean that I’m perfectly fine with this match card. After all, I think it would be more interesting that way,” Sid said, overflowing with confidence and completely relaxed. The other head instructors had expected Sid to either lose his cool and try to negotiate for a change or thought that he would decline to participate in the games. However, now they seemed a little upset by his attitude.

“More interesting? O-Oh really? You sure are confident, aren’t you?”



“Does this mean that you’re fine with watching your students lose horribly?”

“What? Is the pain and humiliation of your students entertaining to you? Hmph. You really are a barbarian, aren’t you?” One after another, they taunted him. However, Sid didn’t care.

“Well, one learns more from defeat than victory, and there’s someone in my class who needs to experience that defeat. While it pains me a little, it’ll be a good opportunity for them,” Sid said, and the other instructors tilted their heads in confusion at his strange remark. “But I have a suggestion for you too. Well, it’s less of a suggestion and more of a request,” Sid said with a slightly troubled look and scratched his face. “That rule about betting points on who wins and loses...how about we just do away with that? That’s a little too much, don’t you think?” After Sid spoke, the head instructors looked at one another, stunned before they all suddenly started laughing at the same time.

“What’s this?! You were talking all big a moment ago, but now you’re asking for that?!”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t overturn the decision. After all, it was something that we head instructors decided!”

“If you’re dissatisfied, we can discuss it again with you included, Sir Sid. However, I think the result is quite obvious!” The instructors laughed and laughed. Since arriving in this kingdom, Sid had continued to show everyone a completely different level and caliber of strength, and for the first time, this brazen man had finally shown weakness. Thinking they had finally bested him, the instructor knights continued to laugh.

“I see. Well, that can’t be helped. If that’s what everyone’s decided, then there’s nothing that can be done,” Sid said. However, without losing his composure, he stood up as if the meeting was over. He then turned on his heel and headed for the exit and said, “But don’t regret it.” Sid’s words were drowned out by the head instructors’ laughter and didn’t reach them. “All right, Alvin. Let’s go.”

“Wait, Sir Sid!” Alvin said and hurriedly chased after him as they made their way back to the waiting area for the Blitze class.

“So that’s what happened. Good luck, you guys.” After returning, Sid explained the situation to his class, and they had the natural reaction.

“What?!” the students of Blitze all shouted at once in a frenzy.

“I-Instructor?! We didn’t hear anything about that!” Christopher said.

“A-All of our opponents are going to be Beriah rank?! Instructor,

do you actually know how strong people with Beriah-rank swords are?!" Elaine said.

"I mean, I know there might not be much difference between Beriah-ranks and Asher-ranks to you, Instructor!" Christopher said.

"B-But for us, it's impossible!" Lynette exclaimed.

"What were you thinking betting our precious achievement points on the outcome of the match?!" Christopher, Elaine, and Lynette all crowded Sid as they screamed and moaned at him. Under their angry looks, all Sid could do was scratch his cheek in embarrassment.

W-Well, it's only natural that everyone would feel this way. Alvin also couldn't understand why Sid had accepted such disadvantageous conditions and had a bitter look on her face.

Just as the situation was starting to get out of hand, Theodore spoke up. "Jeez, calm down, you guys."

"How can we calm down? Do you get what's going on, Theodore?!" Christopher asked.

"Our class's survival is at stake!" Elaine said.

"Hmph. Just another example of the uneducated only being able to see what's on the surface." Theodore snickered at Christopher and Elaine as they panicked, and he looked at Sid. "Think about it. Although Sir Sid had the disgraceful nickname 'the Barbarian,' he's a knight who's achieved many incredible feats of valor during the legendary era. It's hard to believe that such a hero would accept such reckless conditions without a plan. Am I wrong?" As Theodore pointed this out, the students were all in shock and stayed silent.

"C-Could it be?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it," Theodore said, giving Sid a sidelong glance.

"You have some kind of secret plan to overcome the overwhelming difference in our sword ranks, right?"

"A secret plan? Then it all makes sense!"

"R-Really? What is it?!" All of the students gave Sid looks of great expectations, which he calmly accepted.

"My secret plan? I don't have one!" Sid said matter-of-factly with a smug face.

"The hell are you thinking?!" Theodore yelled, joining the others in their panic.

"Hey, relax. I mean, what kind of plan would I have for a fair one-on-one fight? At best, you could poison your opponent or take their lady hostage or something like that."

"That's horrible!"

"How is any of that fair? How?!"

"I mean, I wouldn't do that. I'm just saying that there were a lot of vicious knights like that in the legendary era."

"The legendary era was terrible!"

“This is the end for our class!” The students wailed pathetically.

“Um, I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to explain yourself, Sir Sid,” Alvin pleaded.

“Explain? Explain what?”

“Why did you accept such reckless stakes?” Sid remained silent, and Alvin continued. “Sir Sid, I believe in you. I believe that if we follow you, then even with low sword ranks like ours, we can become strong.” Sid still remained silent. “However, we’ve only been under your tutelage for about a month and a half. And during that time, you’ve only taught us basic physical training and how to use Will. Lately, you’ve started to spar with us, but you haven’t taught us any swordplay or magic from the legendary era,” Alvin said, but there was still no response from Sid. “Our opponents’ sword ranks are far greater than our own. They are squires of Beriah and Atzilt rank who learn fairy magic from their instructor knights and improve themselves daily. In a match with them, the result will just be...” Alvin trailed off and lowered her eyes anxiously. Sid looked down at her for a moment in silence.

He broke into a smile and said, “‘A knight tells only the truth.’ You’ll all be fine.”

“What?” Alvin said and looked up, surprised. The other students suddenly stopped making a fuss and became quiet. After all, if Sid was quoting the knight’s code, that meant...

“You guys need to be more confident. It’s true that it’s only been a month or two since I started training you all. But you’ve been working hard the whole time, even before I showed up, right?”

“T-That’s...”

“You’re right, but...” The students looked at their fairy swords with uneasy expressions.

“B-But our sword ranks are Asher, the lowest sword rank. Only a small percentage of all fairy swords are Asher, and everyone considers them failures as fairy swords—Ow!”

It was like Sid teleported to close the gap between him and Christopher, who he flicked on the forehead midsentence.

“Wh-What are you doing, instructor?!”

“Answer me one thing. Have you ever considered your allies failures?”

“Huh?! Of course not.”

“Okay, then why would you treat your fairy sword, your one and only partner, like a failure?” Sid said, and his students were at a loss for words. “It’s true that Asher-level swords are weak. Of course they are. Your swords are fairy children who became fairy swords out of pure kindness—with the desire to be useful to people. Now, how is that any different than you all trying to become knights with your

various aspirations?" Sid grinned at his students. Then he walked over to Tenko, who was shrunk down behind them. "Tenko."

"H-Huh?! Wh-What is it, master?!" Even though she was standing right there, Tenko's mind had been somewhere else this entire time. Surprised, she jumped and straightened up to look at Sid.

"How are you feeling?"

"I-I'm feeling..." Tenko's eyes wandered as she hugged her sheathed fairy sword. Then, determined, she spoke to Sid. "Master, I've been thinking a lot."

"What's wrong?"

"W-Would you mind if I withdrew from the interclass games?" Tenko asked, and Sid went silent. He looked into her eyes as if he were trying to figure out her true intentions. Tenko, however, turned her face away as if she were trying to run from his gaze. "U-Unlike everyone else, I still can't use Will. I'd just be worthless and drag everyone down with me," she murmured apologetically as her ears drooped. Sid gently placed his hands on her shoulders.

"As your master, I only have one thing to say to you: I don't care. So compete."

"What?!" Tenko exclaimed and raised her face in disbelief. "Wh-Why, master?! Surely you know it too. In this class, I'm the wea—" Before Tenko could finish, Sid silenced her by placing a finger on her lips.

"My apprentice. Don't speak such words and disparage yourself so lightly. Do you not understand why we knights preach the code so adamantly at every opportunity?" Sid asked, and Tenko was shocked. "It's true that with the way you are now, today's match may turn out to be a disappointment. But one learns more from defeat than from victory. There is no such thing as a knight who has never been humiliated or defeated. That's true even for me."

"M-Master..."

"I've been thinking constantly about why someone with such an upright spirit, who's aspiring to become a knight, hasn't awoken to using Will," Sid said, and Tenko listened quietly. "I'm going to watch everything you do. I'm sure I'll find out from your sword just what it is that's blocking you. Believe in me, and don't be afraid of disgrace or humiliation. No matter what happens today, I won't give up on you. I am your master," Sid said firmly to Tenko and stared straight at her face.

It seemed like Sid's words of encouragement worked because Tenko's next words were, "A-All right. I understand. I'll do it." Despite her apprehension, Tenko did her best to muster up her courage and decided to take part in the match.

Soon, the interclass games began. The competition area was divided into four parts, and students from each class competed in one-on-one competitions. There was a death ward cast on the competition, so no fatal wounding could occur. As such, they could use the swordplay and fairy magic that they had been honing every day with no hesitation. In terms of numbers, the most common matchup was between Yetsera users. This was only natural, as over eighty percent of squires possessed a Yetsera-rank sword. In the battles between Yetsera users, there wasn't much difference between levels of strength. Thus, match after match, as long as nothing out of the ordinary happened, they would be close battles. However, things changed drastically when it came to a battle between a Yetsera and a Beriah user.

"Take that trash sword of yours and die, scrub!" In the third competition area, a squire with a Beriah-rank fairy sword had ended their match in an instant by using their red fairy magic to blast their Yetsera-rank opponent with flames.

"Wow! Gato is so strong!"

"That's an elite Beriah-rank for you! Their strength is overwhelming."

"Yeesh, I feel bad for the Yetsera-rank they're fighting."

The First Squires spoke halfway in admiration and halfway in fear as they watched the match play out. Having secured his victory, Gato triumphantly left the match area while his opponent from Anthalo class screamed and rolled around on the ground, covered in flame. The first-aid team for the Ladies of the Lake rushed to the student's side and summoned water spirits to put out the flames. The student had been burned to a crisp, so they quickly used healing magic and applied medicine, healing the burns in no time at all.

"Oh man..."

"Eek!"

Meanwhile, Lynette, who had been watching this beating that was barely a match, was on the verge of tears, and Christopher was speechless. A fight between people whose sword ranks were different was practically a joke. Most of them were settled in the blink of an eye, but some, rarely, would end in a tie. However, when it came to fights between two Beriah-rank squires, it became a high-level competition that shook the venue and enthralled everybody watching.

At the moment, on the second playing field, there was a match between the first-year head of Durande class, Olivia, and the first-year

head of Anthalo class, Johan. Olivia had a red fairy sword while Johan had a green fairy sword—very promising Beriah-ranks that caught the attention of Second and Third Squires who were watching from the audience.

With a swing of her sword, Olivia sent a wave of flame Johan's way. He, on the other hand, created countless earth golems around himself and applied pressure to Olivia from the front. The surging waves of fire mowed down the dense phalanx of earth golems from one end to the other, but the golems that sprang up from behind them were able to take the flames. Johan then rushed through a gap and broke through the sea of fire.

"Bring it!" Olivia shouted as she met Johan's fearsome strike head-on. The sound of clashing metal rang out, and sparks flew. The audience became even more heated and excited as the two of them fought.

"So, those two are at the top of their class for the first years, huh?"

"Ha ha ha. The First Squires are pretty lively this year."

"Yeah, exactly. To think, in just six months they've managed to draw this much power from their swords."

"Looks like we can't afford to get lazy, huh?" The upperclassmen in the audience were watching the match with admiration. However, there was someone there that day who was so strong that they could look down on those high-ranking Beriah swords.

An overwhelming wave of freezing cold, which seemed like it could cut flesh, swirled around the field. The air froze and became shining diamond dust as countless sharp icicles rained down in a barrage. Despite her well-fought match against Johan earlier, Olivia was helpless as the icicles stabbed through her entire body. A large block of ice grew rapidly around her. Trapped, she went completely silent. All of this happened only ten seconds into the match. It was like her fire magic was nothing more than the flame of a candle in the face of this freezing air.

"Hmph," Louise said. The audience fell silent, and under their gaze, Louise Thedias sheathed her dual blades and left the match area.

"So that's..."

"An Atzilt-rank sword." The upperclassmen couldn't help but gasp as their eyes widened, and a cold sweat appeared on their foreheads. This Atzilt-rank blade was considered the sword of the chosen one, and its power was overwhelming. As the members of Blitze class watched match after match of these monsters running rampant, they held their heads in their hands and fell into despair.

"What even was that?" Christopher asked.

“An outlier like Louise aside, the Beriah-ranks we’re going to be fighting will be overwhelmingly strong too.”

“It looks like we’re destined for embarrassment,” Elaine said.

“Waah! I’m scared! This is so scary!” Lynette moaned. The Blitze class had become totally hopeless, and even Alvin had a stiff expression on her face.

Sir Sid said that we’d be okay, but will we really be strong enough? Alvin thought. As for Sid, he was the only one with a relaxed look on his face as he watched the matches.

“Oh! Here comes Louise!”

“Hey, who’s Louise’s next opponent?!”

“Um, according to the schedule it’s...Alvin! Alvin, from Blitze class!”

“Are you serious?! The prince from that class of rejects who got that loser-rank sword?!”

“It’s not even going to be a contest...” In the midst of the audience’s cheers for Louise and heckling toward Alvin, she took a deep breath and stood on the match field. A few meters in front of her was Louise, who had mowed down her Beriah-rank competition and was now standing there with the air of a king.

“Oh, it’s you, Prince,” Louise said, sounding uninterested.

“Louise, this is the first time I’ve crossed swords with you since entering the school, right?” Alvin said as she drew her sword, Daybreak, and slowly readied herself. “Let’s make this a fair fight. No matter who loses, let there be no hard feelings,” Alvin said. However, Louise was apparently offended by Alvin’s resolute attitude.

“No matter who loses?” Louise said, snapping at Alvin. “Hmph. It looks like you are a bit cocky, Prince.”

“I’m being cocky? T-That’s not true.”

“You’re cocky to think that an Asher-rank like you can compete with an Atzilt like me.” Louise’s words left Alvin speechless, though Louise didn’t even give her an opportunity to respond. She continued to speak with a vexed attitude. “Hmph. You’re just from that weak little class of Asher-ranks. Did you forget yourself just because the citizens praised you and said you were the perfect model of a knight when you protected the capital from that dragon?”

“Th-That’s...”

“To be clear, the only reason you all got to play hero during that attack on the capital was because our upperclassmen and high-ranking swordsmen like me were fighting on the Fabome Plains to the north! If I had stayed in the city, I would have been the one to protect the capital and get all the glory!” For some reason, it seemed like Louise

was in a one-sided rivalry with Alvin, who found herself shocked by this revelation. “Putting that aside, Prince, when the match starts, quickly declare your surrender,” Louise continued. “Needless to say, an Asher-rank like you, Prince, won’t be any match for an Atzilt-rank like me. However, you are this country’s prince. I can’t bring myself to embarrass you in front of so many people. That’s why—”

“No, I don’t think I can do that,” Alvin said bluntly, and Louise’s eyebrow twitched. “I don’t know why, but Sir Sid believes in and is supporting me. And a king doesn’t betray the trust of their subjects. Am I wrong?”

“Sir Sid the Barbarian?!” Louise said. She looked over at Sid, who was leisurely standing and watching them from outside the match area, and her face twisted in hatred. “He’s cruel, inhumane, and a disgrace to chivalry! Because of a monster like him, I—”

“Louise?” Alvin said and tilted her head in confusion.

“Prince! There’s something wrong with you as well! Why did you bring a person like that here?! He’s just a violent man without a shred of knightly pride!” Alvin was silent as Louise continued. “The pride, nobility, and traditions of knights serve as examples for our people. Do you really want to cling to someone who could destroy all that just so you can become king?!”

“T-That’s not...”

“There is nothing to be gained from begging that man to teach you! And today I’ll prove as much with my sword!” Louise declared and readied her fairy sword, the Azure Stars. A chilling air overflowed from her twin blades, which quickly dropped the temperature of the surrounding area and made Alvin’s skin tingle.

“Opponents, bow! Now begin!” At the referee’s call, they showed knightly etiquette to one another by overlapping their swords and bowing. With this display of respect, Blitze class’s first match of the day, Alvin versus Louise, had begun.

Louise intended to end the match instantly with a single attack. While relying on her fairy sword to augment her strength, she yelled and launched herself at Alvin, who had her sword out in a mid-level stance. Louise raised her sword and leaped to quickly deliver a powerful blow to Alvin. However, something unexpected happened.

Everyone there had underestimated Alvin and expected the match to be over in an instant. After all, Louise was the highest fairy sword rank while Alvin was the lowest. The rank of a fairy sword greatly affected not just its output of fairy magic but its ability to physically enhance its user. As such, no one considered the match to be even worth talking about. Everyone there thought that Alvin couldn’t even take a blow from Louise. However, everyone had their expectations

subverted. That is, everyone except for Sid, who had a composed look on his face.

With the sound of clashing metal, their swords met, and an unimaginable shock pierced through Alvin's whole body. It was so strong that the hand Alvin was holding her rapier with went numb, and she felt like she was going to drop her sword. However, that was the extent of Louise's blow, and as unbelievable as it was, Alvin had stopped Louise's strike from head-on.

"What?" Louise said in disbelief. Everyone was speechless. Louise had expected to end the match with one attack, and the crowd already started looking forward to the next match. Even Blitze class, who were praying for Alvin's safety as they watched, were all at a loss for words as they stared in shock at the battlefield. With a breath, Alvin broke their sword lock, quickly leaped away from Louise, and once again got into a ready position. Then, as Alvin breathed deeply with a special rhythm, she spoke to Louise.

"Are you going easy on me? That's not like you, since you usually give it your all. Did you think I'm not worth the effort?" Alvin said with a somewhat perplexed and scornful look on her face. However, while there was a faint indignation in her voice, there was no hint of Alvin trying to agitate or taunt Louise. Alvin simply and truly thought that Louise was going easy on her.

"Going easy? Did you say going easy?!" To Louise, it was like she was being looked down on by someone who was beneath her. "How dare you, you lowly Asher-rank?!" In a fit of rage, Louise once again dove at Alvin. With ever-changing swings of her dual swords, Louise unleashed a series of strikes like a raging storm. She delivered a downward chop with her right sword, a reverse strike with her left sword, and followed up with a ferocious forward stab from her right sword. A half second after her swings, diamond dust ran along the path of her twin blades, creating white, shining arcs. All of them were powerful, deadly slashes that a Yetsera-rank or even a Beriah-rank couldn't stop. After all, they were the kind of attacks that could end a battle instantly once they were close enough to reach the opponent. However, Alvin took them all. She skillfully used her rapier, diverting, deflecting, and catching Louise's strikes. It was true that Alvin was being pushed back one step at a time by the number—and pressure—of Louise's sword strikes, but she was standing up to them. She was proving to be a match for Louise.

"W-What's going on here?!"

"W-Why is Prince Alvin able to stand up to Louise's fairy sword?!" The students in the audience couldn't hide how shaken and confused they were by the unexpected start to the match.

“Louise! What are you doing?! Stop going so easy on him!” Even Louise’s head knight instructor, Kreis, had clearly lost his cool.

“Damn it! Hold still!” Seeming to have also lost her patience, Louise increased the speed of her sword swings. A moment later, Alvin brushed aside an approaching right slash and, in a flash, counterattacked. Louise tilted her head to avoid the attack, but the tip of Alvin’s sword grazed her cheek. “Huh?” For a moment, Louise was stunned. It was true. Alvin was keeping up with all of her attacks.

“I-Instructor, what was all that?!” Outside of the match area, Christopher was shouting at the top of his lungs. “Look, I know Alvin is the strongest out of all of us, but this is just crazy, right?! I mean, his opponent is an Atzilt-rank!”

“C-Could it be that you used some kind of magic without us knowing, instructor?!” Elaine asked.

“T-That’s right! You must have cast some kind of amazing magic from the legendary era, which boosts our strength,” Lynette said.

“Calm down. That kind of magic would be against the rules, and it doesn’t exist,” Sid replied with a smirk, sounding slightly annoyed. “It’s just Will. Alvin used Will to send mana to his limbs, enhancing his physical abilities that are now rivaling the output of Louise’s Atzilt-rank sword. That’s all that’s happening.”

“What?!” Christopher said.

“Will makes you strong enough to go toe-to-toe with an Atzilt-rank?!” Elaine said.

“I-I don’t believe it,” Lynette added.

“Even though I’m a living example of all this, you still don’t believe me. You’re going to hurt my feelings,” Sid said, and despite his words, seemed to be enjoying himself. “The knights of this age pull mana from their fairy swords to strengthen themselves and use magic. That’s why a fairy sword’s strength is considered the strength of the user, and they can’t become stronger than their fairy sword,” Sid said. As he spoke, he looked around and then broke off a branch from a tree that was standing nearby.

“Um, what’s that?”

“It’s a branch from what’s called a Silotte tree. It reacts to a certain level of mana and has a tendency to bloom flowers in stages. All of you, take out your swords.” With a quizzical look, Elaine removed her sword from its sheath, and Sid touched the branch to its blade. Before long, a bud grew on the dead branch and then bloomed into a small blue flower. Next, Sid touched Lynette’s sword, and a green flower bloomed on the branch. When he did the same to Theodore’s fairy sword, a red flower bloomed. “So, Asher-rank swords make one flower bloom, huh? So that means that an Atzilt-rank sword

should be able to make at least ten flowers bloom. You can think of the number of flowers that show up as the amount of mana that a sword outputs,” Sid said.

“T-Ten?!”

“S-So that means it’s ten times stronger than our swords?!” Elaine asked.

“Well, yes it would. But watch this,” Sid said and then started to quietly take a deep breath. As he did, buds began to pop up on the branch of the tree and then bloom into white flowers one after another. When the flowers were fully bloomed, they fell off and immediately gave way to new buds. There were ten, twenty, thirty, and then even more. The blooming flowers showed no signs of stopping. “You see that? This is Will.”

“What?! Will is that powerful?!” Christopher asked.

“Unbelievable! You’re saying that a human can produce more mana than a fairy sword?!” Elaine asked.

“It’s really nothing special,” Sid said leisurely to his astonished students and stopped his Will breathing. “Sure, a fairy sword has an enormous amount of mana, but it’s finite, and the amount of mana you can draw out of it is limited. Will is different. It’s a technique where the user takes in the mana that fills this world and expels it by breathing. In other words, it’s almost infinite. Well, there aren’t a lot of people who can do that at the same level as me, though. Anyway, if it’s a simple contest of mana output between fairy swords and Will, Will is the clear winner. The knights of this age aren’t using their fairy swords the right way to begin with, so even an Atzilt-rank sword can only put out enough mana to make about ten flowers bloom. It really is a waste.”

“T-They’re using their fairy swords wrong?”

“Well, that’s beside the point. From what I can tell, with his current level of Will, Alvin could make eight flowers bloom on that branch.”

“Eight?! Alvin could?!” Christopher asked.

“A-Amazing.”

“Why are you so surprised? I’m sure that you guys could make about five or six flowers bloom,” Sid said, and his students looked at one another. Then they took the Silotte tree branch from Sid and tried burning their Will.

“I-It’s true! It made five blue flowers bloom!” Elaine said.

“Me too, it made six green flowers bloom. But you’ve got to be kidding, right? I mean we don’t feel like we’ve gotten any stronger,” Christopher said.

“Of course you don’t. I’m the one you’ve been sparring with, remember? It doesn’t make much difference if your power went from

being level one to level five or six when facing someone who's at level ten thousand," Sid said and took a glance at the back of Alvin, who was fighting desperately. Nervous, Sid's students began to question him.

"B-But even if Alvin can use level-eight mana, an Atzilt rank is level ten, right? Wouldn't he still lose?" Christopher asked.

"Th-That's right! At this rate, he's going to be overwhelmed," Elaine said.

"No, that won't be a problem for this match," Sid declared confidently. "After all is said and done, a low-ranking sword not being able to win against a high-ranking sword is just a simple issue of mana output. And since there's an overwhelming difference in the amount of mana, it isn't a fair fight. It's a no-win situation. However, if the amount of mana output allows opponents to go back and forth, then it's more than enough to make for a decent competition."

"Huh? And just what does that mean?" Theodore asked Sid.

"That's obvious, isn't it? It comes down to a simple difference in skill. While all of you, including Alvin, have low sword ranks, you've worked your butts off for half a year trying to take on those with higher sword ranks, haven't you? In other words, you've been working hard to close the gap by polishing your skills."

"Oh."

"Compared to the majority of students, who are focused on just the power of their fairy swords and skip out on improving their basic swordsmanship and tactics, you guys are ahead in terms of skill. Take a look," Sid said and cocked his chin at the match area.

"Hormilech Eifune!" Louise shouted in the old fairy language. It meant, "Carry out a burial of ice swords in cold blood!"

"Weald!" Alvin retorted, which meant, "Protect me with the wind!" Alvin then skillfully deployed her Wind Shield at an angle and deflected the cold wave that had instantly frozen Olivia in the earlier match. If Alvin had taken the blast from head-on, she would have been overwhelmed by the sheer difference in their mana output, which is why she positioned her shield diagonally.

"That just now was something you came up with, wasn't it Elaine?" Christopher asked.

"Y-Yes, it is. I thought that somehow I could use it to counteract attacks from high-rank sword users, but until now, it was completely useless," Elaine answered.

Sid then reiterated what he just said to his awestruck students. "You see? Your six months of hardships, and the things you've worked so hard to build up along the way, weren't in vain."

"I-Instructor..." Sid's students must have been picturing their half year of trials and tribulations before Sid had arrived and became their

instructor, because they were now speechless and overcome with emotion.

"In that case, why didn't you tell us this before?" Theodore asked, as he was the only one who wasn't caught up in the moment.

"Hmm? That's obvious, isn't it?" Sid said, smiling like a mischievous child. "Because I wanted to see those surprised looks on your faces."

"You jerk!" they shouted with angry and disgusted expressions on their faces. Sid, meanwhile, was once again watching Alvin fight Louise.

"Go, Alvin! You can win!" he shouted.

Hearing this, Alvin was flustered for a second but then said, "All right!" She then stepped in sharply and delivered a counter stab to Louise.

"You can win?! You actually think an Asher-rank like you can beat an Atzilt-rank like me?!" Louise said as she deflected Alvin's stab with her left sword, and her face turned red with anger. "Don't make me laugh. I don't know what kind of magic you're using, but this is as far as it's going to take you!" She forcefully smacked down a rising slash from Alvin with her right sword. At the same time, she kicked the ground, created a cloud of dust, and quickly retreated to distance herself. "Azure Stars, my fairy sword, lend me more of your power! More, I say!" Louise shouted, and at that moment, her fairy sword glowed an eerie blue, and that glow flowed into Louise.

Alvin jumped back in alarm, with her sword poised defensively. Then, almost simultaneously, and like a lion pouncing on its prey, Louise slashed at Alvin. The deafening sound of metal echoed in the air along with sparks and diamond dust that exploded and scattered. After barely catching her attack, the force of Louise's sword blew Alvin back several meters, and her feet left tracks in the dirt. "Now I'll show you my true power!" Louise said and then formed an inverted cross with her swords and spoke in the ancient fairy language. "De Stella El Cruz," she said, which meant, "You are a cross of shining stars in the azure sky." As if in response to the power of her words, the mana in Louise's twin swords rose overwhelmingly and shone. "Forsold Stry Purse," she said, meaning, "Fall and be thrust into the earth." The temperature around Louise suddenly fell below freezing. Then, with a cracking sound, the air and ground around her began to freeze. A heavy pressure and immensely cold air, which froze and stopped everything, fell onto the field. The mana in Louise's swords grew like it was increasing proportionally with the freezing air and pressure. This was not the kind of single-verse spell that Alvin and her classmates used when they invoked fairy magic. It was more like a

spell that used at least three verses and many more words.

“What?! Louise, are you already able to perform a Greater Incantation?!” Alvin shouted in shock.

“De Parso Brin Glasse Pirode!” With her last verse, Louise declared, “And bring silence to the three realms!” With a roar, freezing air swirled out from Louise’s body and became ice and snow. The ground was immediately coated in pure white. Icicles grew and made noise like dancing demons. This fierce blizzard reached extremely low temperatures as it howled and blew through the match area leaving nowhere to run, and it sought to freeze all those who stood in its path. “This is the Greater Blue Incantation, Ice Galaxy of the Three Realms! It’s over!” The violent blizzard came at Alvin from all sides, threatening to swallow her whole. As soon as she stopped, Alvin’s feet were quickly covered in ice that began to spread. She took a deep breath, shattered the ice that was hardening around her feet, and started to burn her Will even more intensely.

“Anarsprink!” Alvin said, meaning, “Let there be gentle spring!” She passed the mana to her fairy sword and wrapped herself in a wind of protection. It was the green fairy magic Spring Breeze Raiment, a spell that reduces the effects of heat and cold. However, the robe of wind that Alvin created couldn’t take all of the snowstorm that was approaching like a tsunami. As her magic failed to completely stop it, the blizzard caused a thin layer of ice to form on her body.

“I’m going to put an end to this!” In the midst of the raging blizzard and freezing air, which had transformed the area into an icy hellscape, Louise leaped at Alvin to put an end to it all. Louise’s onslaught became more powerful and picked up speed. The raging cold air robbed Alvin’s body of its heat, slowing her movements and immediately putting her on the defense.

“Ha ha ha. That’s it! Just like that!” Kreis said, laughing loudly like he was trying to erase the shame of losing his composure. “Yes, this is the difference between an Atzilt and Asher! Teach this dull-witted prince that this is something they can’t overcome with just some petty effort! Ha ha ha!”

Meanwhile, Blitze class was starting to panic.

“A Greater Incantation. You’ve got to be kidding me! Dammit!” Christopher said.

“A-Alvin!” Tenko shouted, and her face turned pale as she watched her friend in danger. “M-Master! What should we do?! At this rate, Alvin’s going to—”

“I see. So, they can use a Greater Incantation. Well, that was unexpected,” Sid said with a complicated look on his face as he

scratched his head.

The fairy magic from a fairy sword would become more powerful if more magic words were devoted to it. Many fairy knights used fairy magic with one or two verses as their main battle tactic. However, fairy magic from a fairy sword that uses three or more verses was known as a Greater Incantation and was a higher magic that affects the very rules of nature, and only a limited number of fairy knights could use it. The ability to perform a Greater Incantation was proof that one was a first-rate fairy knight. The Chosen One, Louise Thedias, with her Atzilt-rank sword, was already able to use a Greater Incantation as a First Squire. Her genius was undeniable.

“Ha ha ha! Well, now that you mention it, that is true. Up until now, I’ve only given you guys basic physical training and Will training. I haven’t taught you guys anything about magic yet.” Sid laughed under the clinging gaze of his students. “Anyway, this match is already over,” Sid said. Then he plopped himself down in a chair, crossed his arms, and closed his eyes.

“M-Master?! What are you doing?!”

“There’s nothing more to see in this match. Wake me up when it’s over,” Sid said, and before they knew it, he had fallen asleep.

“Master?!” Tenko yelled, her cry ringing out to the surroundings.

Even though Louise was a First Squire, she had already used a three-verse incantation. This very fact shook the whole venue. All of the students disregarded the other matches that were happening and gathered to watch the match between Alvin and Louise. At the same time, everyone was convinced that it was already game over for Alvin. They didn’t really know why, but Alvin, despite being an Asher-rank, put up a pretty good fight against an invincible Atzilt-rank. However, she couldn’t keep up her vain struggle any longer. The result of the match was already decided and would soon come to an end.

“Umm, isn’t this match kind of taking a long time?”

“Y-Yeah. Is it gonna keep going?” The students watching the match were gradually becoming restless. Alvin and Louise were still clashing fiercely on the battlefield, but a considerable amount of time had already passed since Louise activated her Greater Incantation. She threaded through the waves of freezing air and snows to deliver a fierce attack. However, Alvin did not falter. Though she was completely on the defense, Alvin skillfully manipulated the wind and continued to fend off Louise’s onslaught. In fact, she was taking advantage of the gaps in Louise’s attacks and going on the counterattack. Louise stumbled a few steps back to avoid the arching

slash that came at her from head-on.

“Is Prince Alvin actually pushing Louise back?”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“But it’s happening.” As the students in the audience buzzed, Alvin, who was originally on the defensive, gradually found more and more opportunities to counterattack.

“Y-You little!” Louise said as she jumped back, brandishing her sword, and the surrounding blizzard once again closed in on Alvin, threatening to swallow her up. Alvin then took another deep breath and burned her Will.

“Fryhaibit!” Alvin shouted, saying, “Fly swiftly and strike firm!” This activated the green fairy magic, War Hammer of Wind, and a sudden gust of wind, like a cannonball, blew apart the freezing blizzard. Alvin boldly slashed at Louise, whose eyes were wide with astonishment. Alvin made three thrusts toward the upper, mid, and lower parts of her body, which Louise desperately avoided. Not letting up, Alvin followed up her attack and put the pressure on. At some point, their positions had become completely reversed.

“N-No way! Is Alvin getting stronger?!” Christopher asked, shocked.

“Did he somehow grow during his match?!” Theodore added, equally surprised.

“M-Master! Please wake up, master!” said Tenko, shaking Sid awake in the chair he had been napping in.

“Hmm? What? Is it over?” Sid said as he woke up with a huge yawn. “What, they’re still going? Jeez, Alvin’s still lacking spirit,” he said as Tenko kept shaking him. He rubbed his eyes and let out another big yawn.

“M-More importantly, master. Exactly what’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, Alvin is getting stronger and stronger in the middle of the match!”

“Dummy. That’s not possible,” Sid said and poked Tenko’s forehead with his finger. “It’s the opposite. Louise is getting weaker.”

“Huh?! What do you mean by that?”

“It’s obvious, of course. All of the knights of this age, including Louise, are using their fairy swords wrong.” Sid cracked his neck. “I told you that the mana of the fairy sword Louise is using can make about ten flowers, right? If you use magic that eats up mana like crazy, like a Greater Incantation, then about half of your mana will disappear all at once. And, of course, the power of your magic and physical enhancements will steadily decrease. Fairy swords get tired too.”

“I see.”

“But Alvin is different. He physically enhances himself by using Will, and when he uses fairy magic, he’s actually giving mana to his fairy sword. This way, even if the match drags out, as long as Alvin keeps breathing, his combat performance will barely decrease,” Sid said, and Tenko and the others gasped. “In the first place, Greater Incantations are magic that were intended to be used with Will—when a sword and its user were working in unison. If you’re just letting your fairy sword do all the work, then even if your magic looks all flashy, it isn’t as powerful as it looks. The returns for doing it are pitiful, and it’s basically like you’re just throwing away the mana of the sword for nothing.”

“I-Is that so?” Tenko asked.

Sid stood up, once again gazing at Alvin and Louise’s battle. Underneath the combined gaze of the venue, they fiercely crossed swords and exchanged magic attacks. While Alvin had beads of sweat on her forehead as she breathed steadily, Louise was clearly struggling, breathing erratically, and exhausted. Alvin only had sweat on her forehead, but Louise’s whole body was soaked, and her knees trembled. “Exactly. If the battle is going to last for a long time, then what do you think will decide the outcome? It’s something that was decided a long time ago, and it’s never going to change,” Sid said with a grin. “It’s basic physical strength. Compared to Alvin, who’s been wearing armor and jogging to the brink of death every day, Louise—with her overreliance on her fairy sword—is woefully under trained. It’s like I told you. This match is already over,” Sid declared, and that’s when it happened.

“There!” Alvin said. Louise’s knees had buckled for an instant, and Alvin took the opportunity to kick the ground and charge at her. In Espirish, she said, “Windurzsaber!” which meant, “Dance to the rhythm of my blade!” With a loud whoosh, Alvin’s green fairy magic, Fierce Wind, activated, and a tremendous tailwind surrounded her sword and overwhelmingly accelerated the speed of her swings. The wind pressure it generated blew away the snowstorm that protected Louise in an instant. Then her sword hit Louise straight on. Louise quickly tried to stop Alvin’s blade with her crossed swords, but Alvin’s sword, covered in a gust of wind, cast them aside and went straight to Louise’s chest.

The ward that the Ladies of the Lake had cast on the field prevented any fatal wounds, but the damage was deep. With a gasp, Louise was flung away through the air by the swirling wind and slammed down on the ground.

“No, I can’t lose,” Louise said with a cough and used her sword like a cane to support her trembling body as she tried to get up. “I have to become the best knight in the land!” Louise struggled to say.

However, she eventually ran out of energy, collapsed in a heap, and fell silent. Alvin, meanwhile, was still on guard against the fallen Louise while the entire venue fell silent.

“Impossible. It’s just impossible.” The only person who spoke was Kreis, who moaned and opened and closed his mouth in disbelief. Even the referee in charge of the match was looking at the scene in front of them as if they were watching a dream. Eventually, after Louise didn’t get up, the referee had to acknowledge the undeniable truth that was in front of them.

“The winner...is Prince Alvin,” the referee announced, and the venue filled with deafening cheers of astonishment.

The cheering was so loud that it was practically earsplitting.

“He did it?! Alvin really did it?!” Christopher asked in disbelief.

“R-Really? An Asher-rank really beat an Atzilt-rank?” Elaine asked. She and the rest of Blitze class were in disbelief over what they had seen.

“I-I’m back, everyone,” Alvin said, returning to her class triumphantly, having worked up a good sweat from her match.

“Oh man, Alvin, you’re awesome!”

“Y-You were really amazing! Congratulations, Alvin!”

“Hmph. Yeah, you did well.” Alvin’s classmates surrounded her, clapping her on the back and making a huge fuss over her victory.

“Thank you.” Alvin laughed and continued to be mobbed by her classmates until she noticed Sid’s gentle gaze directed at her. “Sir Sid,” she said and inched over to him. “I-I did it. U-Um, how did I do?”

Sid placed his hand on her head. “You did well. Good job,” Sid said and rustled her hair. She timidly looked up at him and saw that he was looking down with a gentle smile.

“Thank you!” Alvin said, and her expression relaxed into a smile.

“Alvin...” Meanwhile, at the edge of her vision, Tenko was staring at her with a lonely look. However, as expected, Alvin was too overjoyed and excited from her victory, and too happy from being praised by Sid, to notice anything strange about Tenko’s behavior.

“I can’t believe you actually beat an Atzilt-rank!”

“I’d expect nothing less from the lineage of the kingdom’s great founder, the Holy King Arthur!”

“You’re really amazing, Alvin. I’m jealous.” The other students praised Alvin and looked at her with admiration.

“What are you all saying? You’re going next,” Sid said.

His students looked at him with dumbfounded expressions while giving a collective, “What?”

“You guys have matches after this, right? Go win like Alvin did,” Sid said.

“W-What?!” Christopher asked.

“Y-You want us to win too?!” Elaine asked, shocked. Blitze class’s students started to panic, but Sid answered them calmly.

“Yeah, now relax. All of your matches are against Beriah-rank opponents.”

“There’s nothing reassuring about that!” Elaine said.

“Th-That right! Atzilts are outliers, but even so, Beriah-ranks are like monsters!” Lynette said.

“If it were Alvin, then sure, but for us...” Christopher said.



Sid, however, shrugged his shoulders. "The way you guys are now, an Atzilt-rank opponent would probably be unbeatable. However, you can win against a Beriah," he said confidently, and his students gasped in disbelief.

"Y-You're saying..."

"W-We can win against Beriahs?"

"R-Really?"

"I mean, you guys are trying to become as strong as me, right?" Sid asked, smiling as he spoke. "You guys are becoming knights to protect this kingdom from monsters and dark knights who have terrifying strength, right? In that case, I'm going to need you to finally be strong enough to kick the crap out of these so-called spirit-ranks from this era. Believe me. You'll be okay. Also, believe in yourselves and how you've worked so hard to improve. You are all growing stronger."

"H-Hell yeah! I'm gonna win too!" Christopher shouted.

"Y-Yes! Indeed we will!" Elaine said.

However, a lonely Tenko watched them all from a little farther away. "I-I'm..." Tenko started to say as she squeezed her sword anxiously. "I'm going to win. I can win." She continued to mumble, as if to convince herself. However, the anxious expression on her face never disappeared.

Meanwhile, the next match began.

Chapter 3: Tears

“Cheers!” everyone shouted as the students of Blitze class brought together their cups of apple juice in a toast. They were in the northeastern part of Calvania Castle, gathered in their dorm tower around a burning red fireplace.

“Man, it’s finally over!” Christopher exclaimed.

“Good job, everyone!” Elaine said. The Interclass Games had ended, and now they were celebrating with big smiles on their faces, still excited from the day’s matches.

“I can’t believe it now that it’s over,” Christopher said.

“I-I know, right? I-I can’t believe that we were able to beat Beriah-rank opponents,” Lynette said dreamily.

“To think a day would come when all the hard work we’ve put in until now would pay off,” Elaine said, sounding a little emotional. Her record for the day was three wins and zero losses. After using Will to make up for the difference in mana output between fairy swords, she was able to consistently toy with her opponents.

“Still, Elaine, you’re really something. Your matches were so cool, you know?” Christopher said.

“Oh, is that so? I’m glad to hear it.”

“Yeah, compared to you, my fight was a mess,” Christopher said with a smirk. Like Elaine, his record for the day was three wins and zero losses. However, unlike Elaine, all of his fights were more like trudging through the mud to reach victory. His swordsmanship was rough, and his opponents often controlled the pace of the match, but he was able to endure their attacks with his natural toughness and persevered to win.

“If you ask me, Christopher, your fights were the ones that were extraordinary. It looks like such an exhausting fighting style. Just how much stamina do you have?”

“He he. Well, I’m from a family of farmers, so I’m confident in my stamina,” Christopher said proudly as he rubbed his nose.

“You guys are amazing. Compared to you, I’ve still got a way to go,” Lynette said, laughing faintly. Lynette’s record for the day was two victories and one loss.

“It’s not your fault. After all, you’re more of a support position,” Theodore said as he sipped his juice at the end of the table. “Your magic works best in team fights and cavalry battles. One-on-one close

combat is your weakest kind of matchup. Be happy that you have more wins than losses.”

“In that case, you should be happy about your victories too,” Christopher said, making fun of Theodore.

“Hmph.” Theodore snorted and turned his head away in a huff. He also had three wins and no losses for the day. He was weak when it came to crossing swords with opponents due to his blade’s short reach. Hence, Theodore completely gave up on close combat and instead employed a long-range fighting strategy with his fire magic. This was one of the solutions that he found through his training with Sid. At the games, this caused Theodore to receive a tremendous amount of heckling and ridicule from his opponents and the audience. They told him things like, “Fight the right way,” “You’re a coward,” and, “You call yourself a knight?” Just remembering it made Theodore’s expression become dark, and he grew silent.

Sid slapped Theodore on the shoulder. “Hey, don’t sweat it. Might makes right. The whole fight fair and not be a coward thing is just a bunch of crap.”

“Sir Sid, are you really a knight?” Theodore asked bitterly. “If you are, wouldn’t this be where you would say that I should fight fair and act like a knight?”

“Sorry, but I wasn’t born in such a well-behaved era,” Sid said and shrugged. “Of course, I’m not dismissing anyone’s fantasy of knights fighting fairly. I also like that kind of thing.”

“F-Fantasy? If those knights in the upper echelon who value pride and honor heard that, they’d probably be furious.”

“Yeah, probably. But a lot of times in actual war, there is no room for such fairness. The longer a war drags on, the more people are made aware of the ugliness and the depth of the darkness in their own hearts. As humans, we are confronted with just how tiny our existences are. That’s why we knights cherish those rules we have. In order to not be swallowed by the darkness in our hearts, we don’t forget what is right. We wield our swords for something with even a little bit of purpose,” Sid said, and Theodore listened quietly. “That’s why, even if your power is called cowardly, as long as you can use it properly as a knight, you have nothing to be ashamed of. You should be proud of it,” Sid said, and his students listened intently to him.

Even though they had experienced a real life-or-death battle in the capital, in the end, it was just them hunting a monster—not war. The days of war were long gone, and most of the people in the present day knew nothing of it. That’s why the words of someone like Sid, who had fought through the time of chaotic warfare that was the legendary era, resonated deeply with them. “Well, you guys did generally well this time. I commend you,” Sid said to his students, and their faces

melted into smiles at his praise. "Especially you, Alvin. Including your fight with that Atzilt-rank, Louise, you triumphed wonderfully in all three of your matches. Good job!"

"Oh, yes! Thank you!" Alvin said. Sid then reached out his cup to lightly touch Alvin's, and a ding echoed throughout the lounge. Meanwhile, a somewhat gloomy Tenko quietly stared at them from the corner. The students were so happy with their victories that they didn't notice her, and their commotion continued.

"Yeah, Alvin. Unlike us, one of your wins was against an Atzilt-rank. We just can't keep up with you," Christopher said.

"On the other hand, I feel sorry for Louise. In her match with Alvin, her fairy sword completely ran out of mana, and her reaction to the Greater Incantation caused her to faint. Then she had to abstain from her next match because she didn't regain consciousness," Elaine said.

"An Atzilt-rank having only one win and two losses was such a huge upset," Lynette said.

"Hmph. For soldiers, victory and defeat are incidental," Theodore said. Even though she was defeated, the students shuddered as they remembered Louise's overwhelming power.

"B-But, what happened afterward was ridiculous, right?! Even though Alvin beat an Atzilt-rank and won all his matches, he wasn't chosen for the Best Newcomer Award!" Christopher said indignantly.

The one who was chosen was Johan, the first-year head of Anthalo class, a Beriah-rank who had won their three matches just like Alvin. Apparently, Johan himself hadn't expected to be chosen either, and he received the medal for Best Newcomer with a very complicated expression on his face.

"I think I have a vague idea of the kind of discussions that were going on at the top," Elaine said.

"Our victories must have really unsettled them," Theodore said.

"This world is so cruel," Lynette added, and the three of them sighed.

However, Sid laughed and said to them, "Don't worry about that. What's important is that your hard work paid off and you won. Now isn't that better than some medal?"

"Th-That's true, but..." Christopher said.

"In that case, don't feel so down. And hey, it looks like they've brought a little reward for you guys," Sid said as the housekeeping fairies, Brownies, appeared. They were all carrying platters of food on their heads as they bounced onto the table and quickly laid everything out. The moment the students saw the spread, they all let out a loud, "Oh!" There was freshly baked white bread, roast beef, pudding, pies, fritters, potage soup, galettes, salad, and fruit tarts for dessert. It all

seemed to make the top of the table practically sparkle and shine.

"Well, we did unexpectedly get a lot of achievement points," Alvin explained as she scratched her cheek with an awkward smile. "It seems like we'll have some extra points for a while, so I gave some to the Brownies and asked them for this."

"The look on those head instructors' faces when they had to hand over their points to me was hilarious," Sid said.

"Y-You're so mean, Sir Sid," Alvin said. However, the other students were no longer paying attention to their exchange, since they were so absorbed in the food on the table.

"Once again, here's to today's victory," Alvin said.

"Cheers!" everyone said in unison, and they started their dinner, which felt like it came from a dream.

"Whoa! Th-This is delicious!" Christopher said. The cheers of Blitze class echoed throughout the common room, and they filled their empty stomachs.

"This is the first time we've had a proper meal since entering this school," Elaine said.

"Y-You're right," Lynette said, and both of them were moved to tears.

"Jeez, you guys are so overdramatic," Theodore said, but he couldn't stop eating either. As they ate, they all talked excitedly to one another.

"Ha ha. I'm glad you're all enjoying it so much," Alvin said and had a gentle smile on her face as she watched all of them. "Sir Sid, what do you think of an actual decent meal from this era?" Alvin asked. Then, surprisingly, Sid grunted with a very complicated look on his face as he brought the food to his mouth.

"It's too soft and doesn't have enough bite to it. My tongue is getting confused from how complicated this seasoning is."

"O-Oh really? That's too bad. Ha ha." As usual, Sid's senses were out of sync with those of modern people, and all Alvin could do was laugh awkwardly. "In that case, I'll order your food separately next time, Sir Sid."

"Please do," Sid said. As they talked, Tenko came and, without a word, sat to the left of Alvin. She just quietly stared at her empty plate. It seemed like she hadn't touched the mountain of food piled in front of her at all.

"Come on, Tenko. You have some too," Alvin said. "I even ordered some of your favorite eastern food, um, fried tofu." Tenko was still silent. "Look, if this is about the results of the games, then you shouldn't worry so much about it. Sir Sid said so himself, didn't he? You still have a lot ahead of you, so—"

“Thank you, Alvin, but I’m done,” Tenko said, and Alvin’s concern was in vain.

“T-Tenko. If this is about today’s games—”

“N-No, it’s not that. I’m just not very hungry. Ha ha.”

“Come on.”

“Besides, I actually have some errands to run right now, so I’ll be heading out,” Tenko said and stood up suddenly.

“Tenko!”

“Alvin, congratulations on winning all your matches today. You really are amazing. One day you’ll definitely become a great king, and many great knights will follow you just like the former king, Auld,” Tenko said, and Alvin was quiet. “Enjoy yourself tonight,” Tenko said with a chuckle and left the lounge. Meanwhile, the other students were having so much fun that they didn’t notice she had left.

“Tenko!” Alvin said and stood up to chase after her.

“And just where is the host going?” Sid said and placed his hand on Alvin’s shoulder to keep her from leaving. “What kind of king leaves their subjects behind at a celebration?”

“B-But Tenko is—”

“I’ll go,” Sid said and stood up. Alvin looked a little like she was going to cry. “Leave it to me.” He had a very gentle and deep look in his eyes.

“Sir Sid.” Alvin stared into his eyes for a while as if she were being sucked into them. Eventually, she made up her mind and said, “Okay. Please take care of Tenko. Ever since she was little, she has had a tendency to really worry about things.”

“I got you,” Sid said and quietly exited the lounge so that the other students wouldn’t notice.

After Tenko left the lounge, she made her way to the rear courtyard of Blitze class’s dorm tower. It was a deserted place surrounded by a small forest. The Brownies did the bare minimum in terms of maintenance, but there was nothing to see that would make it relaxing. It was such an uninteresting and dreary place that the students of Blitze class seldom went there, and right now, Tenko was quietly standing alone in the middle of it. The sun had long since set, and the area was pitch black, save for a single garden lamp that illuminated the surroundings. The sky was covered in thick, heavy clouds. In the fall, this region’s weather was prone to rain, and even though it had been clear during the day, it looked like it was about to start pouring. The cold wind seemed to allude to the coming winter as it stole the heat from Tenko’s body. From the surrounding forest, she could hear the occasional soft chirping of birds.

Tenko silently drew her katana-shaped fairy sword and stood at

the ready. Then she practiced swinging it. *One, two, three.* Tenko swung the blade while rhythmically breathing like Sid taught her. However, nothing happened to Tenko's body. Even so, she continued to practice. *One hundred and one, one hundred and two, one hundred and three.* While she cleared her mind and continued her swinging, the weather finally changed, and drops of cold rain began to fall. Little by little, the cold rain drenched her body. However, she paid it absolutely no mind and continued to swing. As her swings followed through with the frightening accuracy that had etched itself into the core of her body from swinging hundreds of thousands of times throughout her life, she thought back to the day's match.

“Ha ha ha. That's what you get, Tenko!” The loud laughter of Durande class's Gato echoed throughout the match area as Tenko slumped at his feet, all beaten up. She hadn't let go of her katana, but the outcome of the match was clear to anyone watching. Thanks to the Ladies of the Lake and their death ward, as well as their healing magic and medicine, these battles never turned deadly. Matches could continue until someone lost consciousness and was unable to fight—or until they gave up. However, matches going on until someone lost consciousness were rare. In most cases, the opponent who suffered an injury to their legs or dominant arm, or received so much damage that there was no longer a chance for them to win, would surrender first and the match would end. As for Tenko, she had been driven to the point where she could have given up a long time ago. However, she didn't surrender.

“I can still fight,” Tenko said, and her body trembled as she used her katana like a cane to bring herself to her feet. It seemed like she could fall over at any second. “I have to...win...at least one match,” Tenko said to herself.

“Tenko, that's enough! Stop it!” Alvin shouted from outside the match area. Currently, the other members of Blitze class were competing on different fields, so Alvin was the only one watching Tenko's match. “If you keep going, you'll just be hurting yourself for nothing!” Alvin was all alone in trying to stop her, but it was no use.

“I will become a knight...Alvin's knight!” As Tenko endured the maddening pain running through her entire body, she kept herself conscious with just her spirit and slashed at Gato. However, her attack, which was normally as fast as the wind, was currently as weak as a gentle breeze.

“Oh really?” Gato naturally dodged her attack with plenty of time to spare and hooked Tenko's leg. Unable to control herself, she once again collapsed at Gato's feet, and he grinned at her. “Yeah, I'm really

glad that you're still a weakling!" he said. "I don't know what you did, but your class of Asher-ranks suddenly got so strong that I thought you were all cheating. That's fine. You're still a small fry."

"N-No!" Tenko argued with him and tried to use her hand to stand up, but Gato stepped on it, and she cried out in pain and couldn't move.

"This is pretty pathetic, right? I mean, you're the only one in your class who's been beaten this badly. You're not embarrassed by that? And didn't you say you were going to become Alvin's knight? From the looks of things, don't you think that Alvin is going to get tired of how weak you are and throw you away? He he he." His words made her feel like something stabbed her deep in the heart, and she opened her eyes wide.

"Th-That's not true!" Tenko said, but Gato continued to laugh, unfazed.

"I've been telling you this for a long time now, but how about you stop serving Alvin and come to me?"

"I-I would never."

"I've always wanted to own a noble-tail, you know? But since Tenkagekoku fell, they've become quite the rare commodity." Tenko had always known that Gato had an infatuation with her. However, it wasn't the kind of romantic infatuation between a man and a woman, but the obsession one has for a pet or a slave. "Why don't you stop being loyal to the prince with no future and come with me? I won't throw you away even though you're a small fry. I'll take real good care of you, he he he," Gato said to a shocked Tenko. "How about if you swear you'll be mine, then I'll lose the match? That's perfect for someone who survived their country falling because they were so weak, right? Ha ha ha!" It was so frustrating for Tenko. She just couldn't forgive this boy. He wasn't satisfied with just disgracing her honor. He had to go after her people too. She was ashamed of herself for being so weak that she couldn't fight back against him at all. It felt so pathetic. She couldn't let this humiliation stand.

"Tenko, stop it already!" Alvin shouted, but her cry fell on deaf ears. With a yell, Tenko mustered up her strength, pushed off Gato's foot, and stood up.

"How dare you? My pride! I won't forgive you! I won't!" Tenko yelled with tears in her eyes as she slashed at Gato. However, it was just a sloppy strike with no real form or technique.

"Jeez, noble-tail women sure are stupid. Oh well," Gato said and leisurely swung his sword down at Tenko as she attacked him.

Tenko came back to her senses after remembering her match, and

she was greeted with the explosive sound of rain, which had started pouring without her realizing it. It was as if the powerful downpour had flipped the heavens, and Tenko was drenched from head to toe. The sky was enveloped by dark clouds, and flashes of lightning sometimes appeared in the gaps like a snake flicking its tongue. The cold rain pierced through her body, robbing her heat with each passing second. Still, Tenko continued to swing her sword. As a result, she gradually grew colder and began to lose strength. Her body felt like lead. While her katana was normally as light as a feather, it became heavy. Her sword style, which had etched itself into her core, was now disjointed and erratic.

The reality that confronted her today was that she had three losses and zero wins. She had a feeling that something like this would happen. However, her classmates kept winning, one after another, against their Beriah-rank opponents. Surely, it must have been because of Sid. Thanks to his teachings, everyone was able to overcome the wall they had hit in their training. So what was the deal with her continuing to lose so pathetically? She was receiving the same training as everyone else, but how had she fallen so far behind?

She once again swung downward. However, rather than stopping, her sword continued and pierced the ground. Out of breath, she was feeling like she would never be a knight, and, compared to Alvin and the others, she just didn't have what it took.

To begin with, I'm... Tenko thought as she dropped to her knees. She hung her head while clinging to her sword, which was stuck in the ground. Pummeled by the rain, she sniffled and started to cry. However, just then, she heard a voice.

"Don't cry. Get up."

Tenko looked back fearfully, wondering just how long he had been watching. Standing there silently was Sid. Just like Tenko, he was soaked from head to toe, so he had apparently been watching over her for a long time.

"M-Master..." For a moment, Tenko didn't know how to respond and couldn't speak. However, before long, almost as if she had to wring out the words, she sniffled and said, "I-I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

"Because even though you've taught me so much, I couldn't make use of anything," Tenko said. It was as if she was forcing herself to speak through her tears. However, Sid only answered with silence. "I'm pitiful, aren't I? And even though I'm such a mess, I thought that if I had you to teach me, I would be able to become stronger than anyone," Tenko said, but Sid still said nothing. "In Tenkagekoku, I was the daughter of warriors. I probably started learning how to use a sword sooner than anyone else. In fact, if it were just a straight-up

sword fight, then I'd be the strongest, but..." Tenko trailed off, and Sid continued to listen. "I was just conceited. I have no talent," she said between her hiccups and sniffles.

Sid slowly walked over and stood at Tenko's side. He ruffled her wet hair. "Don't give up on yourself," he said.

"Master?"

"Sometimes this world is cold and indifferent, and it'll rarely understand or accept you the right way. That's why you, at the very least, have to believe in yourself," Sid said. "It's true. You have to be the one to believe in what you've done—and what you have to do." He looked up at the dark sky, and rain poured down like a waterfall. For some reason, his words had a tremendous weight to them. "Tenko. I watched all of your matches," Sid said and then paused. "And there's one thing that I have to ask you."

"Wh-What is it?" Tenko asked and found herself overcome with a feeling of dread.

Sid remained silent for a while and then frankly asked, "You're actually thinking that you don't want to be a knight, right?"

Tenko was shocked, and at that very moment, lightning flashed and struck down somewhere in the distance as the sound of thunder echoed throughout the darkness. Eventually, the thundering ceased and was taken over by the loud sound of rain.

"Wh-What are you asking?" Tenko whispered as her body shuddered. "I-I don't want to be a knight? E-Even if you are my master, there are some things that you shouldn't say." With tearful eyes, she glared up at Sid. However, he looked down at her with eyes that seemed to see through to the depths of her heart. "How could you... How could you say something so horrible?! Do you have any idea just how hard I've worked this whole time to become a knight?!" she yelled, but Sid didn't say a word. "My homeland was destroyed! And when I fell into despair, it was King Auld and Alvin who saved me. That's why, when the king asked me to protect Alvin, I was so desperate to do my best!" Sid still said nothing. "But you're terrible. I didn't think you were the kind of person who'd say something like that. You really are a barbarian who doesn't understand how people feel!"

However, even as Tenko wound herself up with sorrow and anger, Sid was unfazed and said, "I told you before, didn't I? Your feelings come out in your swordplay." His words surprised her, and she was silent. "Today, I watched your matches from afar, and, yeah, I saw how desperately you fought. Your swordplay is beautiful. I'm always smitten when I see it. However, perhaps because it was a match—where things become black and white—I was able to see something. Just as your defeat became imminent, I could see in your swordplay a

feeling that you had kept hidden. And that feeling was relief.” Tenko’s eyes grew wide. However, Sid continued and started to say, “What it means is—”

“That’s a lie! That can’t be!” she said, interrupting him as she stubbornly shook her head in denial.

“No, I’m confident in my judgment when it comes to things like this. Somewhere deep down inside of you, you don’t want to be a knight. Do you know what I’m talking about? Tell me. This is important.”

“No, that’s absolutely not true! I’ve worked hard until now to become a knight!”

“Tenko.” Sid got down on one knee in front of Tenko, who was still crouching on the ground, and matched his gaze with hers. Then, as he looked straight and deep into her eyes, he quoted the old ways: “A knight’s bravery glimmers in their hearts.” Once again, Tenko found herself speechless. “Being courageous doesn’t just mean facing some hopelessly strong opponent. Facing your weakness and your true self, without running away, is also courage,” he said, and she continued to stare at him. His face came very close to hers. Then there was a heavy silence between the two of them that lasted for a moment—a moment where even the heavy sound of the rain blasting down was surrounded by a distant silence. As the warmth left their bodies, it was as if the world was freezing. The occasional roar of thunder and flashes of lightning across the sky were the only things to break the stillness of the moment.

Eventually, almost as if she had given up, Tenko muttered, “Yes.” Her voice was so faint that it might as well have belonged to an insect. “Th-The truth is...I didn’t want to become a knight! I’m afraid of fighting!” Tenko finally opened up and blurted out the feelings she had so stubbornly sealed deep inside her heart. She then clung to Sid as she sobbed violently.

After a while, she calmed down a bit and spoke little by little in a fading voice. “My mother, Tenki, was a true warrior who protected the emperor and our land. She really was a strong person, and I always considered her my goal for what I wanted to become. And yet, on the day my homeland was destroyed...my mother was killed all too easily by a dark knight. She couldn’t protect anyone or anything.”

Sid said nothing as he listened to her speak in the midst of the pouring rain. “Of course, I’m angry about my country being destroyed, and I feel hatred over the murder of my mother. I also feel like I will become strong and avenge her and everyone else one day. However, I lost heart that night,” she said, and Sid remained silent. “I mean, my mother was that strong, and she couldn’t protect anything, you know? Since that day, deep in my heart, there’s always been this fear and

anxiety. I felt like no matter what someone like me did, in the end, it would all be for nothing. Besides, if I were to become Alvin's knight, then I would surely one day face the dark knight with the cross on their helmet—the one who killed my mother,” Tenko said, hugging her body as she shook. “I'm afraid. I fear that knight more than I hate them. I can't shake the thought that no matter how strong I become, I won't be able to do anything as they kill me.” Sid stared at Tenko with an unreadable expression. “You really are amazing, master,” she said and let out a dry laugh, shaking slightly. “It's just as you say. I really don't want to become a knight. Becoming one is a burden to me. However, I had lost everything...and since King Auld, to whom I owe so much, asked me to take care of Alvin, there was no other path that I could take. Now that I think about it, the reason I was so quick to call you master was probably to keep myself from running away—to bind myself to becoming a knight. I'm sorry, master. I'm such a pathetic child. You must be so disappointed in me, right?” Tenko sobbed as she faced the ground.

“Tenko,” Sid said as he gently patted her on the shoulders. “I'm sorry you had to go through that. Thank you for telling me.”

“M-Master...”

“I now know why you couldn't use Will.”

“What?” Tenko asked and blinked in confusion.

“There's one thing that I haven't told you all about Will because I didn't think it was necessary.”

“W-What's that?”

“Before I told you that Will is a technique focused on igniting your soul. You need to use a special rhythmic breathing to take the mana all around you into your soul and make it your own, right?”

“Yes.”

“In addition to that special breathing, there's one more thing that you need in order to ignite your soul. It's a faint but certain spark of emotion, a strong positive emotion that drives you straight forward with unwavering belief. Your actual desire.”



“My desire?” Tenko said, stunned, and Sid nodded.

“Once a person decides to do something, their beliefs and desire can sometimes give them unbelievable strength. Will is an extension of that,” Sid said. One’s desire... As soon as Tenko heard that, she felt something move inside her heart. When she thought about it, everyone from Blitze class—Alvin, Christopher, Elaine, Lynette, and Theodore—all had a strong desire to become knights. Each of them may have had different reasons for doing it, but there was no question about their desire to do so.

“It’s called Will because you use positive forces of willpower like justice, dreams, hope, desire, and friendship to ignite your soul. That’s why most of the people who used Will in the legendary era were knights—people who would dedicate their life and their sword. They lived for such things.” Tenko listened to Sid speak and didn’t say anything for a while. Eventually, a wry smile appeared on her face, and she looked down.

“So that’s why I can’t use it, huh? It’s because I don’t want to become a knight. All I have are these negative feelings. I’m just afraid and want to run and not fight.” Tenko laughed, mocking herself. After she laughed for a while, she said, “I’m going to quit school. I wasn’t cut out to be a knight. With someone half-hearted like me around, it’ll just cause trouble for Alvin. I’ll just...” In the end, Tenko couldn’t finish and began to cry in the rain.

However, Sid said resolutely, “Even still, you should be a knight.” At that moment, thunder and lightning once again tore through the sky. Tenko’s vision went completely white from the flash, and then Sid’s face gradually came back into focus. The look he was giving her was a serious one.

“Wh-Why?” Tenko asked, completely confused. “Why? I mean, I just said that I don’t want to be a knight. And that’s why I can’t use Will.”

“You felt that becoming a knight was a heavy burden. It’s true. However, I’m sure that’s not all there is,” he said, and Tenko was shocked into silence. “I told you that your swordsmanship was beautiful. It’s not the kind of thing that you can achieve by looking backward. It’s the product of your continued dedication in spite of having lost everything. There must be some kind of positive force of desire inside of that.”

“Th-That’s just because...”

“To begin with, if you really feel—with all your heart—that you don’t want to be a knight, then why are you crying?” Shocked, Tenko touched her cheeks, wet from her tears and the rain. “Those tears are proof of it. Even if becoming a knight is a burden to you, there’s some

special reason that you wanted to do it. That's all there is to it."

"B-But I don't know! I don't know what that is!" Tenko wailed and shook her head like she was an upset child. "I mean, don't those things contradict each other?!"

"Tenko. A person's heart isn't light or dark or black or white. It's not as simple as that," he said. "We all live in a kaleidoscope of contradictions. When it comes to the inside of one's mind, no one paints with just a single color. That's why everyone loses their way, suffers, and struggles."

"B-But I..."

"Even Alvin is the same way," Sid said, and Tenko stopped talking. "Even though she's a woman, Alvin plans to become the king as a man. Do you really think that she's just going forward on such a hard path without any hesitation or struggle of her own? Do you really think that Alvin is someone so flawed that she doesn't have a single thought about how hard it is—doesn't want to run away?"

"I-I..." Tenko was at a loss for words, and Sid spun on his heel to turn his back on her.

"In that case, what do you think is the difference between you and Alvin? She's admitted her weaknesses and decided to move forward. You haven't admitted them and just pretend you don't see them. That's all." Sid walked slowly away and then turned around when there were about ten meters between him and Tenko, who was still on the ground. He then got into a fighting stance and said, "I'll ask you again. Whether you go forward or back down, this is a turning point in your life. Right now, in this moment, face your heart, and with all your might, give me your answer."

"What?"

"You've just faced the weakness that you've been pretending not to see. Now that you have, do you wish to become a knight? Or do you not want to? Will you go down the path of knighthood? Or will you retreat?" Sid asked, but Tenko didn't answer. "Whatever you choose, I swear to respect your decision. So, what is your answer?" For a while, there was only their silence and the tremendous sound of rain between them, and it felt like time stopped.

"I-I don't know what to say to that all of a sudden!" Tenko shouted out and trembled. "Tell me, master! What should I do?!"

"Don't act so spoiled. Think for yourself," Sid said, harsher than usual, and Tenko shuddered and gulped. "A knight is someone who burns away their very life and soul for the sake of a great cause and their lord. Only those who have the will to be a knight can do so. If you can't decide by yourself, then you surely won't become a knight, and you'll just pointlessly lose your life on some battlefield."

"I-I..." As she hung her head, her lips quivered like she was

searching for words to say. However, nothing came out of her mouth. She didn't know if she did or didn't want to become a knight, and her thoughts spun around chaotically in her head. "I-I..." She continued to think about who she was and what she wanted. In the midst of the cold stillness and the violent sound of the rain, Tenko desperately tried to grasp the thread of her thoughts. She thought about what it meant to be a knight. Behind the heroic and brilliant image that everyone yearned for, there were things that couldn't be ignored. If she were to become a knight, she would cast herself into a world of blood-soaked conflict, and one day, she would have to fight the fearsome dark knight who killed her mother. She would have to accept and prepare herself to meet her end someday on some battlefield for the sake of her lord, Alvin. The thought scared her. She hated it and wanted to run away. She thought, *Why do I have to meet such a fate? Why do I have to walk down that path?* Just from picturing that kind of future, it made Tenko's entire body shudder with fear.

Now that I think about it, wasn't I just a little girl who liked swords? Tenko admired how cool her mother was, and when she practiced her swordplay, her mom would pat her on the head, saying, "You're doing great." She just worked hard and practiced because that made her happy. All she wanted to do was follow in her mother's footsteps, the path of a warrior who protects others. However, she didn't know what following that path entailed. Her younger self just innocently admired her mother without understanding anything.

That's right. I should give up. I'm not cut out for this. I'm such a coward. I shouldn't become a knight. Even if I did, one day I'll definitely regret it. So...

"I'm going to..." Tenko had reached a conclusion, and her answer was right in front of her. Yet, for some reason, she couldn't finish her sentence. She had no idea why it was so hard to say she wasn't going to become a knight. Something was stuck in the back of her mind, and it was blocking her from taking the final step. What was it? Almost as if to search for the answer, she looked up, and it was then that she noticed something. At some point, Alvin had shown up and was at the edge of her field of vision. Just like Tenko, Alvin was drenched by the rain and was watching her from the corner of the garden. "Alvin," Tenko said, and in that moment, she realized something.

Before, Tenko had lost everything, including the will to live. However, Alvin saved her. Thanks to Alvin, she was once again able to smile. *I love Alvin for being so kind...* Tenko thought. A harsh fate awaited Alvin. Even though she was a woman, she would become the king as a man, and, in the end, she would have to fight various enemies in order to protect the country. It wasn't hard to imagine that Alvin's life from here on would be filled with hardships. There was no

way she could hope to have happiness as a woman. *I wanted to carry Alvin's heavy burden, even if only a little. I wanted to protect her and support her, so I...*

"Huh? I-I..." Tenko stuttered. The real reason that Tenko wanted to become a knight was a simple one. King Auld asking her to take care of Alvin was definitely one of the reasons, but the truth was she just wanted to...

"I'll become a knight!" Tenko shouted when she realized what her real reason was. "I'll be a knight! I want to become one! I'll do it to protect Alvin, so—" Just then, Sid disappeared. He cut through the downpour, rushed toward Tenko, and unfurled his left arm. "What?!" Tenko shouted. While she had been standing there in a daze, she and Sid crossed paths. She was blown away and bounced in a puddle of water with a flourish.

"Well done, my apprentice. You've made your decision," Sid said as he looked back at Tenko slumped in the mud. "Now, stand up and ready your sword."

"What are you doing?" Tenko coughed with a confused look on her face, and Sid once again disappeared from her sight. There was the sound of water splashing, and Sid rushed by Tenko like a shadow, sending her body flying spectacularly for a second time. As she coughed and gasped, Sid continued to speak to her.

"Tenko. You've made your decision, so you can't make any more excuses or complain anymore." He turned around, and she was sprawled pathetically on the ground. "If you had given up your path to knighthood and chosen another path, I would have congratulated you on your new life. However, now you're a knight. You wished to become one and chose the path to knighthood. There's no turning back now, and you won't be spoiled. You have to become strong."

"M-Master..."

"Stand. Even if it's hard, even if it's difficult, clench your teeth, and stand up. Wield your sword. Even through your tears. Show me your determination with your blade, and come at me! You're a knight, aren't you?!" With Sid's scolding, a small flame began to smolder deep inside Tenko's heart, which had grown cold before this. She used that to push herself as she slowly readied her sword. She then kicked up from the puddle and made a rushing slash toward Sid. However, the instant Tenko was within striking distance, Sid once again disappeared with incredible speed, and Tenko's body was, yet again, blown back and through the mud as she yelled.

"Is that it? Is that all you've got? You still want to give up your knighthood? If that's your decision, I don't care what you do."

"I don't want to give up!" Tenko said, clenching her teeth as she stood. "But I'm weak! I'm just too weak!" That moment, Sid rushed by

her with lightning speed and blew her back for the third time.

"If you've got time to whine, then try landing a hit on me," Sid said. Tenko used her katana to support herself as she stood up. She then yelled as she slashed at Sid with all of her might. Sid moved his body and dodged her oncoming attack, which cut through the rain. He then pulled back to dodge her successive blow and deflected her sword by poking the flat of the blade with his finger. He then dodged a series of attacks from her as she slashed furiously with tears in her eyes.

"It's not enough! Step into it more! Use all your strength, and come at me like you're trying to kill me!"

"Why? Why?!" Tenko cried as she slashed chaotically without any technique. "Why won't you give up on someone as weak as me, master?! Why don't you just abandon me?!" Tenko said, and Sid continued to calmly dodge her attacks. "Even I hate how weak and pathetic I am. Still, I can't give up on being a knight! Why are you still doing this, master?!" Tenko asked. Then, as Sid dodged her attack, he lightly hit her in the chest. The tremendous impact of his strike caused her to be blasted backward horizontally like a ball as she rolled and bounced on the ground.

"You idiot. What kind of master gives up on their apprentice?" Sid said, and her eyes went wide with surprise as she coughed and spit up muddy water while crawling on the ground. "A knight tells only the truth. So, I swear to you. I won't give up on you, and I will always be your master."

"M-Master."

"Now, strike! Swing your sword! The heart can become stronger! And you can too, as long as you hold on to your desire to be strong!" Every one of Sid's words set Tenko's soul ablaze with an overwhelming amount of passion. Sid would never abandon her, and that feeling of relief filled the gaps in her soul.

Just then, as Tenko panted roughly, she felt a warm sensation tremble deep inside her body. She felt hot. She had never had this feeling before. It was as if something was burning fiercely inside of her. However, she couldn't afford to focus on that. She felt she had to show something to her master, who had done so much for someone as pathetic as her. Almost as if she was compelled by the heat that burned deep in her chest, she stood up and kicked the earth with a loud yell, then dashed straight at Sid. Her stride was a mess, her breathing was erratic, and her sword technique was nowhere to be seen. It was the most atrocious strike that Tenko had ever made in her entire life. However, her whole body was on fire, and she understood with her soul, and not logic, that for her right now, this was the best possible strike she could make. She let out a battle cry and swung

down her sword. By the time she realized it, Sid had stopped her attack with the palm of his left hand and, as usual, didn't have a scratch on him.

Suddenly, the heat and strength drained from Tenko's entire body. She felt so weary and exhausted that she couldn't stand, and her consciousness began to fade away. Her body fell forward, but she was held in place by Sid's powerful arm.

"M-Master?"

"Well done," Sid said as he stroked her head and held her limp body. "That was Will."

"Will? Just now?"

"Yes. While it was only for a moment, your Will was definitely ablaze. You faced the weakness that you had ignored until now and listened to your true self again. That became the spark for your soul," Sid said, and Tenko was silent. "That just now was an accident, so we can't really say that you've awakened to using Will yet. But you've certainly caught a glimpse of it. Your desire is going to pave the way for you, so it's all right. You can become stronger."

"M-Master."

"That's it for this remedial lesson. Now, let's head back. This is going to be bad for your health."

"Master! Master!" Tenko couldn't hold back the warm feeling building up inside of her, and she bawled her eyes out as she clung to Sid. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome," he said, and Tenko's consciousness gradually faded away as Sid began to walk back to the dorm tower while carrying her in his arms.

"Tenko, thank goodness." Meanwhile, Alvin watched the two of them with a gentle expression.

Chapter 4: The Encroaching Darkness

The sound of water droplets reverberated throughout Alvin's private bathroom. Steam filled the comfortably warm air, and Tenko was completely naked in the hot water of Alvin's marble bathtub.

"Phew, I feel much better," Tenko said as her fox ears twitched and her tail swished in the water. The relaxing warmth that spread through her body melted away her fatigue, and the sensation she had lost in her fingers was finally coming back. Her body, with its elegant curves, was turning a slightly pink color in the hot water.

"You worked really hard, Tenko." Alvin was shoulder to shoulder with her in the bath and also naked. However, she wasn't Alvin at this moment. With her magic comb, she removed her disguise. Now her hair, which was as long and beautiful as golden thread, swayed on the surface of the water. She wasn't a prince—just a girl, Alma. Her beautiful naked body was well-proportioned, and her breasts swelled like unripened fruit. Droplets of water simply rolled off her young, taut skin. The steam rising from the water was barely sufficient in hiding the outline of Alma's body.

"How do you feel? Are you still hurt? You were beaten up pretty badly by Sir Sid."

"To be honest, I didn't need to use any healing magic, and I don't have a single bruise on me. It seems like he was just blowing me back and forth the entire time. Seriously, his skill is terrifying," Tenko said and sighed as she looked at her body curiously.

Alma looked over and seemed happy. "It's been a long time since the two of us have taken a bath like this together, huh?" She chuckled.

"Y-Yeah. We used to do it a lot together when we were kids," Tenko said, embarrassed as she sank into the water to hide herself. A little earlier, when Sid and Tenko's private lesson had ended, Alvin discreetly invited her to take a bath for old times' sake. Considering their positions, Tenko most likely should have said no, but at that moment, she accepted the proposal without hesitation.

"Oh, this takes me back. When we were kids, you used to hate baths, so I'd have to drag you into the water by force, remember?"

"H-Hey that was a long time ago, all right? If you want to bring that up, then how about the fact that you were so bad at washing your hair that I had to do it for you?"

“Hey, that was a long time ago.” Alma laughed, embarrassed, then leaned into Tenko with her shoulder. “Still, it’s been a while since we’ve...I mean, since we’ve been able to take a bath together like this, huh?”

“Yes, our positions in life are different now,” Tenko said. Then with a nervous expression, she asked, “U-Um...is this really okay?”

“Is what okay?”

“You know, taking a bath with you like this,” Tenko said, but Alma said nothing. “If somebody found out that I was going in and out of your mansion at this hour, then it would probably lead to some strange rumors,” Tenko struggled to say as she turned red, and Alma chuckled.

“I think I’d be okay with that.”

“What?!”

“I mean, it’s not unusual for men in the royal family to have a mistress or a concubine. So, a rumor about you and me would mean that people really do think I’m a man.”

“You wouldn’t hate it if there were rumors about the legitimate and honorable heir to the throne having a noble-tail as their companion every night?”

“If you’re the companion, then I don’t think I would mind at all.”

“Oh, come on, Alma,” Tenko said with a sigh, and Alma laughed bashfully. For a little while longer, the two of them had fun chatting and enjoyed their bath together.

“Thank you, Tenko,” Alma said.

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

“I’m happy that you chose to become my knight,” Alma said with a very large smile. “The truth is, for a while I’ve been worried that I may have been putting an unnecessary burden on your shoulders this whole time.”

“What are you talking about?! Please don’t say things like that,” Tenko exclaimed and turned to look at Alma so abruptly that water splashed. “I’m going to become a knight and protect you! That’s what I decided as a child, so there’s no need for you to feel guilty about it! Besides—” Suddenly, Tenko fell silent. She was a little delirious from the heat, and the fleeting thought in her mind was of Sid confronting her in the rain. *Master...* The strong light that Sid’s gaze gave off was still burned into her eyes and wouldn’t go away. The powerful words that Sid gave to her were still reverberating in her mind. Just turning it over in her thoughts like this raised her spirits, and just thinking of Sid made her cheeks turn red and her body feel so light it was like she was floating. *What is this feeling?* It was a warm sensation that lit up her heart. Strangely, it seemed to summon courage from deep inside of her, and even though she was still inexperienced, she was

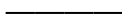
overflowing with hope that she could do her best from here on out. *That's right. As long as he's here, I don't have to worry. If I follow him, then I'll...* Tenko thought vaguely as she felt her heartbeat quicken.

"And just who are you thinking about?" Before Tenko realized it, Alma had slipped behind her, seeming somewhat upset, and squeezed Tenko's breasts with both hands.

"What?! Alma, what are you doing?!" Tenko screamed hysterically, and her ears perked up.

"It looks like I'm going to have to punish this naughty knight for disregarding her lord and thinking of some other man. Take that!"

"What?! Alma, wait! Knock it off!" The water splashed and rippled as their naked bodies intertwined. The sound of their shrieks and splashing water reverberated through the bathroom. Before long, their voices changed into happy, playful laughter.



After their bath, Tenko sneakily made her way back to the dorm tower of the Blitze class, changed into her pajamas, and sprawled out on her bed. Since she had just gotten out of the bath, her body was still flushed. Even more so than that, she could feel a heat that was quietly burning deep inside of her.



The heavy rain could be heard from outside her window, and it still showed no signs of stopping. In the corner of the room, the fireplace burned quietly and squelched any cold air that found its way inside. In her dimly lit room, she stretched out her hand to the ceiling as she listened to the sound of the rain. While absentmindedly staring, the thoughts that naturally came to her mind were the same as before—thoughts of Sid. *Master...*

Looking back on the day, a lot had happened. She lost her matches badly and became depressed enough to want to give up becoming a knight. Then she poured out all of her feelings to Sid in the middle of the rain, revealed her true self, and realized that she really did want to become a knight. While she was lost in herself, she was able to burn her Will, even if it was for just a moment. Even though fighting was scary, and it felt like a burden, she wanted to protect Alvin and be by her side. If nothing else, surely that was Tenko Amatsuki's truth.

"All right! Starting tomorrow, I'm going to do my best again! If I work hard, then I might be able to use Will freely. No! I will be able to use it!" Tenko said, hyping herself up as she stared at the canopy of her bed. "I'm really glad that he's my master."

Sid was the strongest knight of the legendary era and truly an amazing person. He was able to pick up on the weak part of her—that she was trying to ignore—and he confronted her face to face. He even said, as her master, he would never abandon her. He accepted her weakness, chided her, supported her, and still treated her more kindly than anyone ever had. She wondered if there was anyone else who could be like this. She then turned over on her bed and buried her face deep into her pillow. *I feel a little sorry for Alvin, but right now, just right now, I can't stop thinking about my master.* She wondered why she felt this way. It was like her feelings toward Sid had changed because of what happened in the middle of that downpour. She had always had strong feelings toward Sid, but those were more like admiration and worship, since he was a legendary knight. The feelings she had now, however, were... *Somehow, these feelings are kind of similar to the ones I have for Alvin. However, they feel a little different...* As she tried to figure out what these pleasant, albeit anxious, feelings actually were, her cheeks glowed red. *Well, I guess that's enough for today.* Her thoughts had calmed and were beginning to drift away. Her mind and body were exhausted, and now she just wanted to rest, so she decided to leave these thoughts for tomorrow.

"Alvin, master, as long as you're here, everything will be..." As Tenko thought of the people precious to her, she slowly started to drift away to the land of dreams. However, she was instantly shaken from

her comfortable euphoria by the laughter of a young girl. This dark, cold laughter rang like a bell and seemed to come from the very depths of the sea as it echoed with a mysterious beauty. Tenko grabbed her fairy sword that was standing close by and rolled her tired body off the bed. She quickly readied herself for the intruder, who appeared without warning. She heard a giggle and the words, "Good evening."

On the sofa, a single girl was sitting with her legs crossed. She had beautiful silver hair and deathly pale skin. There was a bewitching charm to her that would bewilder even her fellow sex, and she wore a gorgeous gothic-style dress. On her head, for some reason, she wore a sinister crown. On her face was the kind of mask that nobles wore at masquerades, which covered only her eyes. It was clearly meant to conceal her identity, and it was hard to tell the shape of her face. However, she was clearly an extremely beautiful girl. There was something odd about her. Somewhere in Tenko's heart, she felt like this masked girl resembled someone she knew. However, she had absolutely no time to think about that. The overwhelming darkness that rose up from the girl made Tenko's senses go crazy, and she felt a chill run down her spine, accompanied by an intense pressure. What was standing in front of her was a beautiful young girl, but she had the presence of a towering giant. The darkness was as black as the depths of the ocean, and it blotted out the heat and light of the blazing fireplace as if the temperature had dropped to below freezing. What had just appeared before Tenko was an inhuman monster in the shape of a human being.

"Wh-Who are you?!"

"Who indeed?" the masked girl answered and coyly placed her index finger on her thin chin. "Endea. Well, how about I call myself Endea for now?"

"E-Endea?" Tenko said, surprised. She was sure that Endea meant "the end" in the ancient fairy language of Espirish.

"But that's beside the point. I have business with you, Tenko Amatsuki."

"How do you know my name? And where the hell did you come from?"

The girl didn't answer and clicked the sole of her boot as she stood up. "Now don't make a fuss, all right, Tenko?"

"Wha—" At that moment, time stopped. Tenko started to hyperventilate and couldn't move an inch. Endea walked toward her. Tenko had a fierce premonition that if she moved, she would die. Her hands, knees, and whole body trembled with fear as her sweat and tears began to flow. Her sword, which was still in its scabbard, was incredibly heavy, and she felt like she would drop it at any moment.

“Oh my,” the masked girl said as she tilted her head and gave Tenko a deranged smile. “Hey, are you scared? Are you afraid? Are you afraid of me, Tenko?” Endea chuckled. It was clear that this girl was extremely dangerous. She was terrifying, but her words were so sweet and comforting. Tenko’s body, which should have been warm, had already become colder than when she was in the rain. As a practical waterfall of cold sweat dripped from her body, she realized something.

I’m...going to die, Tenko thought as her heart beat like it was going to burst, but she stayed as stiff as a statue. The masked girl then casually walked up to her. *This feels just like that time...that time when my mother was killed by the dark knight with the cross on their helmet! I’m going to be killed, and there’s nothing I can do about it.* Tenko knew this, not with logic, but with her very soul. She had felt this suffocating presence of death before. If Endea wanted it, Tenko’s life would be severed like a gardener plucking away the extra buds on a rose. The difference in strength between her and this girl was just that great.

Before long, Endea came so close that Tenko could feel her breath. She then smiled devilishly and said, “Oh, you poor thing. You’re shaking so much.” With her right hand, she touched Tenko’s cheek. “You don’t have to be so afraid. I’m not here to harm you, after all,” she said. Tenko tried to answer but barely any noise came out. “Don’t worry. You can relax.” Endea chuckled. That moment, the strength left Tenko’s body. It was like she was a puppet who had its strings cut, and she struggled to not fall to her knees. She felt like she had come to the very edge of death and was now deeply relieved she was set free. In fact, it was embarrassing just how relieved she was at the thought of being allowed to live.

“Th-Then...just why did you come here, E-Endea?” Tenko asked hoarsely like she was trying to squeeze out the words. Endea then tilted Tenko’s chin and looked closely at her as if she were going to kiss her.

“I want to be your friend.”

“F-Friend?”

“That’s right. Your friend.”

Tenko had no idea what was going on, and, at this point, there was nothing else in her mind aside from fear. And yet, for some reason, Endea’s gaze and her words kept creeping into Tenko’s mind, and her very existence was being eroded away.

“You see, I’ve taken a liking to you, and I think we’re going to be good friends. So, how about you leave Alvin and join me?” Just then, Tenko’s emotions exploded, and she was able to move again. As if to shake herself free from Endea’s temptation, she jumped back and readied herself to draw her sword.

“You’re Alvin’s enemy?!”

“Oh? You’re mad?” Endea asked, puzzled.

“Don’t be absurd! I’m Alvin’s knight, and I’ve sworn to fight to protect him! If you try to trick me, I’ll show you no mercy!”

“Ha ha ha. There’s no need to act so tough,” Endea said, and Tenko heard her voice from right next to her ear.

“What?” By the time Tenko had realized it, Endea had disappeared from in front of her and was now hugging her from behind.

“The truth is you’re always trying to act so tough, but really you’re weaker and more cowardly than anyone else. Don’t you get tired of always lying to yourself and pretending to be strong?” Endea whispered sweetly into Tenko’s ear like she was coating her soul with poison.

“N-No... Master told me so. I may be a coward, but I’m also myself, and I want to be Alvin’s knight!”

“Yes, yes, I understand,” Endea said with a mocking laugh. “But no matter how much you tell yourself that, you’re still a coward, right? That’s the indisputable truth...isn’t it?”

“Th-That’s...” Tenko found herself unable to deny what she said, and Endea mischievously gave her a peck on the cheek like a bird. The moment Tenko was kissed, she felt a burning sensation on her cheek. Then something black began to flow from the spot and into Tenko, eroding her soul and sullyng her mind. “Wh-What did you do?!” Tenko said, flustered by the change to her body.

“Ha ha ha. Don’t look away, Tenko. And don’t fool yourself with pretty words like you want to protect and serve someone. You have to face your true nature, your fear, and the darkness. After all, no matter how noble someone may be, once they die, that’s it, right?” Endea said, and Tenko struggled but couldn’t answer. “You’re afraid to fight and afraid to end up the same way your mother did. Still, how can you lie to yourself and say you’ll become Alvin’s knight? Are you really okay with that? You won’t regret it?” Endea’s questions were just like Sid’s, while being completely the opposite. Tenko should have already found her answer, but she was once again unsure, and her sense of who she was became unclear. Even though she had made such a firm vow to become a knight just a little earlier, now she was wavering so much. Listening to Endea’s sweet and bewitching words was making her mind become unclear.

To combat this, even just a little, Tenko raised her voice and said, “And just what do you want me to do?! What am I supposed to do?!” Earlier, Sid had warned her about this question and how the worst thing she could do was let someone else decide for her.

Satisfied, Endea smiled sweetly at Tenko and said, “I just said it,

didn't I? Let's become friends."

"What?"

"I can take away that fear and darkness in your heart. Unlike Alvin, who can only shackle you and bring you pain, I can make you truly free and happy."

"How would you do that?"

"It's simple," Endea said. As she embraced Tenko from behind, she extended her right hand forward and opened her palm in front of Tenko's eyes. As she did, a darkness welled up in her hand. Then something was born from the inside of it. It was a katana with a sinister black blade. Just looking at it, Tenko could tell that there was a horrifying and overwhelming dark mana emanating from it. "The answer is power."

"P-Power?"

"Yes. The kind of absolute power that can make anyone submit and bow down to you. With something like that, don't you think all that fear would just disappear? You'd have nothing to be afraid of."

"I-I..."

"I can give you that kind of power. If you just desire it, you can become happy—if you grab this sword, that is." Tenko gazed fearfully at the black sword being raised right in front of her eyes.

"I-Is this a black fairy sword?"

"That's right. It's your very own sword that I put all my heart into making for you."

"You're not from the Dark Order of Opus, are you?" Tenko asked, and Endea laughed. Tenko didn't even have to think about whether or not she would accept Endea's invitation. If she accepted, she would never be able to return to the light again. A dark knight was the one who killed her mother. This offer wasn't even worth a single thought. *But why is there a part of me that's considering accepting it?* If she didn't accept Endea's invitation, she might not make it out safely. Aside from that, the offer was enticing. To Tenko, the most terrifying thing of all was the fact that she was actually considering it. Perhaps it was because of the kiss that Endea gave her, or some kind of magic, but as she listened to Endea's voice, she found herself losing track of her own mind. Tenko was beginning to feel like Endea was speaking the truth about the world, and she wanted to surrender herself to her.

"Come on. Take it. This sword is pretty strong, you know?" Endea said, and Tenko was unable to move. She then grabbed Tenko's hand and made it hold the black sword. In an instant, Tenko's body was overcome with a dark feeling of omnipotence. From the sword, a thick darkness flowed into Tenko, washing over her body and mind, transforming her into a different being. At the same time, she could feel herself being pushed to unbelievably incredible heights. The

power was amazing, and the way she had struggled so much with her training seemed so ridiculous now. "See? Astounding, isn't it? I can easily give you the strength that you longed for so badly...if you join me."

"N-No, stop it!" Tenko said and felt fear and disgust at how she was changing into something else. However, even that feeling was fading away. Attempting to make at least some resistance, Tenko tried to release the black sword from her hand. "Wh-What?! Why can't I let go of it?!"

"That's because somewhere inside you, you've accepted this sword," Endea said, and her words made Tenko's heart tremble. Whether that trembling came from disgust or elation, Tenko could no longer tell.

"I-I want this? This horrifying power?!"

"That's right. I mean, you can feel it, can't you? How overwhelming and absolute this power is. You can feel all of that fear in your heart disappearing too, right?" This was terrifying to Tenko. It was terrifying because everything that Endea was saying was the truth. The fear that was always tormenting her was swallowed up by the darkness and disappeared without a trace. A sense of euphoria and power had taken over Tenko's mind, and that was the most terrifying thing of all. However, even that last bit of fear was disappearing.

"No, no, no! I-I am..."

"It's okay. Just give in to the power of the darkness. You have the potential to become the most powerful dark knight of all. I'm not like that heartless Alvin, who torments and doesn't care about you. I sincerely want you to be happy and will give you anything to make that happen. I'd say that it's pretty obvious between Alvin and me who is most suited to be your best friend, wouldn't you?"

"A-Al... Mas...ter..." Just as Tenko was about to be entirely swallowed by darkness, her body moved as if it were being repelled. She felt like her soul was being torn apart, and she threw the black fairy sword away, slamming it to the floor. She then placed her hand on the hilt of her own sword and drew it. Casting off all of the darkness and temptation, Tenko's strike slashed around behind her toward Endea, but Endea jumped back and dodged it with ease. Tenko's do-or-die attack didn't even leave a scratch.

"Why?" Endea said and stared dumbfounded at Tenko and the black fairy sword she had tossed to the floor. Tenko was out of breath as she hung her head, and her body shook like she had a fever. "Hey, why did you do that?" Endea asked coldly as her shoulders shook from anger. "Why did you reject me? You were actually able to do that?"

Tenko panted.

“This is wrong. I peeked all around inside your mind and even used charm magic! You shouldn’t be able to resist me!” Endea declared angrily, and Tenko was still out of breath. “You’ve always had so much fear and darkness hidden in your heart. You’re so gifted. You have the potential to be a dark knight stronger than any other! You shouldn’t have been able to refuse me! A black fairy sword should be like a drug to you! Why were you able to resist?!” Endea screamed hysterically.

“A-A knight’s bravery glimmers in their heart!’ I am Alvin’s knight, and I won’t join you!” Tenko said. Suddenly, a dangerous silence, that carried a deadly sense of foreboding, took over the room. The dumbfounded expression on Endea’s face disappeared, and she was emotionless—but then she was filled with rage.

“What was that?” Endea said, her eyes as dark as the depths of hell. “Sir Sid? You were able to resist the temptation of the darkness because of Sir Sid?” Endea said, and Tenko became confused.

“That man is going this far for Alvin? He didn’t do anything for me, but he’s going to do all of this for Alvin?! Why?!” Endea asked, and for a while, chewed on her fingernails as if she was trying to hold back her fury. Eventually, all the emotion left her face like an evil spirit had fled from her body. “I’m sorry, Tenko. I thought that we could become good friends, but if you’re going to reject me like that, then I’ll just have to do this.” Tenko was immobile, and Endea picked up the black fairy sword. Then she ran her finger along the blade, showing Tenko as she did. Next, she slowly pointed the sword’s tip toward Tenko. Just as Tenko hoarsely tried to speak, Endea thrust the black sword into her chest, moving so quickly it was like she teleported. The edge of the sword penetrated Tenko completely and stuck out of her back. A fountain of blood like a blooming flower sprayed from her wound. She coughed up blood and her sword dropped from her hand, making noise as it rolled on the floor.

“A-Al...” The strength quickly drained from her body, and she dropped to her knees with the black sword still stabbed in her chest. She fell to the floor with a thud, and her body sank in the sea of her own blood that was spreading out on the floor.

“Goodbye,” Endea murmured. She looked down with heartless cruelty at Tenko, whose consciousness plunged further and further into the depths of darkness.

Chapter 5: Disappearance

Night gave way to dawn on the day after the interclass games, and the Blitze class students thundered through the halls of their dormitory.

“Elaine! Did you find Tenko?” Alvin called.

“I beg your pardon, Alvin, but she is nowhere to be found!”

Alvin gulped. “Okay, got it. I’ll be back later!”

After checking in, Elaine and Alvin brushed past each other, and Alvin galloped up the stairs. They weren’t the only ones searching—Christopher, Lynette, and Theodore likewise combed over the dorm.

“Tenko! Hey, where are you?” Christopher called.

“I-If you’re there, please answer me!” cried Lynette.

The Blitze class tore through the dormitory without stopping, practically turning the place upside down in the commotion.

Alvin clenched her teeth. Her whole body burned with unease while she raced through the building and despaired. “Why? Why is she missing?!”

Today was supposed to be a day like any other, beginning with early morning training. The students had dressed themselves at dawn and gathered on the training grounds. However, no matter how long they waited, Tenko did not join them. Had she overslept? Maybe she was still exhausted from yesterday. With this thought in mind, the Blitze class set off to see Tenko in her room.

Yet she was not there. Her room was completely deserted, apart from an enormous bloodstain on the floor, and, lying in the middle of it, Tenko’s fairy sword. What had happened here last night? No one knew, but there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Tenko was in trouble.

“Tenko!” Alvin wailed. She bolted through Calvania Castle, desperately holding back the impulse to break down and cry. Students from the other classes turned inquisitive eyes on her, wondering what was going on, but Alvin was in no state to care. It was the blood, all that blood in Tenko’s room. What if that was Tenko’s blood? She shook her head, trying to drive away the mental image of her friend meeting the worst possible fate. *Tenko?!*

Alvin remembered their bath the night before. It was the first time they had bathed together in many years, a time she had spent with Tenko as Alma, not Alvin. Tenko had smiled. It was a bright, cheerful

smile, as if she had overcome her own indecision. It felt like she was beginning to make great progress.

So, *why? Why...why is she missing?!* Alvin willed her legs to run even faster, but just then—

“Calm down, Alvin.” Someone caught her upper arm with a smack, stopping her in her tracks. It was Sid. “Isabella’s searching for her with magic too. If Tenko’s somewhere we can see by mortal means, we would’ve found her already. Getting worked up won’t do her any good.”

“Sir Sid?” Alvin gasped. “But Tenko, she’s... Her room is covered in blood!”

Sid was silent.

“She must be in some kind of danger! Maybe she’s even already... Oh no, what should we do? If Tenko dies, I don’t know what I’d...” Refusing to listen, Alvin struggled against Sid’s restraints as tears leaked out of the corner of her eyes.

“Forgive me, my lord,” Sid said, and—wham! He struck Alvin across the cheek.

Whatever technique he used prevented it from hurting all that much, but Alvin still yelped. The impact was enough to cause the tide of chaos and confusion controlling her mind to recede.

“Calm down,” Sid repeated. “You are our ruler. It’s unbecoming of you to fall to pieces like this.”

“Sir...Sid?” Holding her cheek, she stared up at him in confusion.

He looked straight down at her as he continued. “You’re thinking Tenko is already dead, right? Listen up, Alvin. If that turns out to be true...then that makes her your first subject to lose their life for you.”

Alvin made an alarmed noise in response. Her eyes opened wide in shock.

“From now on, as you lead your subjects, there will be times when you must keep fighting for the sake of your people. As this happens, more of your subjects will die for you. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t grieve for them, but you need to be prepared for it.”

Alvin was silent. She squeezed her eyes shut tight and stood there for a few moments without saying anything.

Finally, she said, “I’m sorry... I lost all my composure. Thank you for your advice.” The words sounded like they were pulled out of her. She clenched her fists and began to tremble.

“There’s a good girl,” Sid said. With a sudden smile, he stroked her hair. “But you know,” he added, “even though I said that, I don’t think Tenko’s dead.”

“...Huh?”

“Her fairy sword was still in her room. When a sword’s user dies, the sword goes back to the Lake of Swords. Based on that, she has to

be alive.”

“Oh...”

“Still, that doesn’t mean we can be too optimistic. Besides...” Suddenly, Sid’s face took on an uncharacteristically complicated expression.

“Besides what?” Alvin prompted.

“Sir Sid. Prince Alvin.” Suddenly, a woman’s voice came filtering down from overhead. It must have been some kind of teleportation magic. A magic circle floated in midair as specks of light gathered and danced around it, forming the image of a woman. It was Isabella, the leader of the Ladies of the Lake.

“Isabella?!” cried Alvin.

“Did you find Tenko?” Sid asked.

Isabella nodded, gravely. “We did. It appears as if a dreadful incident occurred in her room last night.”

“Really? What was it? Tell me, where did Tenko go? Is she okay?” Alvin frantically begged.

Isabella began her report in a matter-of-fact tone. “We Ladies have spent the morning using our magical abilities to explore every nook and cranny of the Blitze dormitory. In one of the rooms, we discovered a faint trace of dark mana. This room used to belong to Flora.”

Alvin gasped. Flora! That was the name of the incredibly powerful witch who summoned the dragon from the fairy world through the connection deep in Calvania Castle. As the head of the Dark Order of Opus, she had used her witchcraft to fool everyone around her into thinking she was a First Squire.

“There can be no mistake,” Isabella continued. “Her room connects to somewhere else via a Fairy Road.”

Alvin, shocked, yelled, “A Fairy Road?!” Fairy Roads were a long-distance transportation magic that relied on the use of the fairy world. These pathways connected two points in the material world to cover the same distance many times more quickly.

“One can assume that during her time here as a student, Flora laid the groundwork for this operation by building this backdoor with the Fairy Road. Unfortunately, due to the earlier disturbance causing considerable damage to the protections on this castle, it was a simple matter for her to connect to this Fairy Road.”

“That means the Dark Order of Opus is behind Tenko’s disappearance,” Sid said. “They must have snuck into the castle with the Fairy Road and took Tenko out the same way.”

“Most likely, yes. However, we have not yet confirmed that Flora is indeed the perpetrator.” Isabella nodded, confirming Sid’s reasoning. “Yet, considering how cleverly she hid the existence of this

back door up until now, I am rather concerned over how blatantly they left their tracks this time.”

“Who cares?!” Alvin rushed up to Isabella. “More importantly, do you know where the people who took Tenko are going?”

“Judging from a simple follow-up we performed with tracking magic, we believe this Fairy Road likely connects to the demon kingdom in the north.”

“But what for? How come they didn’t try to assassinate me or anything? Why did they go out of their way to kidnap a First Squire instead?”

“I’m afraid we simply don’t know those answers yet.” Isabella evaded Alvin’s questions and hung her head. “I apologize, my prince. This is all my fault. Fundamentally, humans without fairy swords or other such tools cannot use magic. Barring exceptions such as Sir Sid, the only beings of flesh that are capable of using magic are the half-human, half-fairy Nimue. That is why we Ladies of the Lake swore an oath to your royal family, to pledge our support and...prevent tragedies such as this.”

“Isabella...”

“Thus, for both the earlier disturbance and this new horrid state of affairs...I truly have no excuse.”

“N-No, Isabella, it’s not your fault!” Alvin refuted, seeing Isabella’s exhausted, downcast eyes. Frankly speaking, Isabella was far too busy to be concerning herself with such a minor matter. She already managed all affairs of the crown in Alvin’s place on a daily basis. As if that were not enough, she also needed to check the ambitions of the three dukes attempting to usurp Alvin’s rightful place on the throne. Unable to devote her full attention to the castle’s magical protections, she had no choice but to let her vigilance slip.

At least when I become king, Isabella won’t need to do all this! Alvin trembled as she cursed her own current incompetence.

Suddenly, Sid spoke up as nonchalantly as someone trying to decide what to have for lunch. “Well, look at you two being Doom and Gloom over there. If she was abducted, we’ll just bring her right back. Right?”

“Huh? Sir Sid?”

“Say, Isabella. This Fairy Road magic cuts down on travel time, right?”

“Y-Yes, it does...”

“We know that the destination is the northern demon kingdom, which is pretty far away, and it takes a good bit of time to get there. It stands to reason that they must still be in the Fairy Road. Therefore, problem solved.” Sid stood up. “We can go after them using a Fairy Road too. Right?”

“P-Pardon?” Isabella said.

“Sir Sid, if we leave now, can we catch up to them?” Alvin asked.

“We should be able to,” Sid proclaimed confidently. “I figure this Fairy Road wasn’t set up by legitimate means, so they’ll have to take a pretty roundabout route to wherever it is they’re going. That makes it possible for Isabella to formally set up a Fairy Road that links us back, and we can use it as a shortcut to get ahead of them. Right?”

“It is possible, yes, however...” Isabella mumbled with a frown.

“Fairy Roads belong either to the light or the dark. Without a doubt, the ones who kidnapped Tenko must have used a Road belonging to the dark side. This makes that Road their domain.”

Sid fell silent.

“Do you understand what this means?” she asked. “In a domain of darkness, powers of darkness are stronger, and the powers of our light fairy swords grow weaker. It is extraordinarily dangerous.”

Alvin gulped. “D-Did you just say that our fairy swords will be weaker?”

To a knight, a fairy sword was the difference between life and death. Now they were told they must fight on a battlefield where their swords were weakened. What an utterly hopeless situation! Even if they assembled a team of the most elite fairy knights to rescue Tenko, just how many would come back alive?

“Furthermore,” Isabella added, “the dukes would never send any of their best knights out to rescue a Blitze class First Squire.”

Alvin held her head in her arms.

Then Sid boldly declared, “You don’t need to ask them for help. I’ll go.”

“What?” Alvin cried.

She and Isabella were at a loss for words as Sid continued with the same degree of confidence. “I’m positive I can go after Tenko and bring her back. Isn’t that good enough?”

“Sir Sid,” Isabella said, “were you not listening to me? If you catch up to Tenko’s kidnappers and engage them in the Fairy Road, you will be fighting within their domain.”

“Yeah, which cuts the power of fairy swords, right? No big deal. I don’t have a fairy sword.”

“That changes nothing! To fight a being of darkness within a dark domain is the absolute height of folly! You are a knight of the legendary era, yes, but that has no bearing here.”

“Folly?” Sid repeated. “Yeah, that’s fair.” He gave her a broad grin. “But even if it is, sometimes you just have to go for it, no matter how stupid it is. That’s what being a knight is all about.”

Isabella gasped.

“And see,” Sid continued, “I’m Tenko’s master. I can’t possibly

abandon my apprentice. If you try to stop me, I swear on my honor as a knight that I'll push past you and go."

Isabella could not respond.

"Though," he said, offering a suggestion. "I've sworn my sword and my Will to Prince Alvin as his knight. I don't have the ability to make an arbitrary decision and go off on my own. For me to act, I need his royal command, don't I?" Sid turned to Alvin with a grin. "So, Alvin, how about it? Just say the word, and I'll do it."

"S-Sir Sid?" Alvin asked. "Tenko is only one girl. It would be horribly selfish of me to ask you to rescue her. But even then, would you still do it?"

Sid chuckled. "What a ridiculous thing to say. Aren't I your knight? You can order me to save a single friend in danger or protect countless subjects—and, well, what's the difference?"

Alvin gasped.

"I see now," Sid continued. "You're right. There will be a time when, as a king, you will need to make that choice. But now is not that time. So come on. I am yours to command. Whatever it is you want me to do, I swear as your knight to fulfill your orders in every way."

When her knight swore to her in such terms and offered his blade to this degree, who was Alvin to say no? "All right," she said. "Luck is on my side today. Sir Knight, for your infinite loyalty, you have my gratitude." She steeled her resolve, took a deep breath, and plunged on. "The squire Tenko was kidnapped, and she is my loyal subject and irreplaceable friend. She will become a knight to defend our kingdom! Our kingdom shall suffer a terrible loss without her! Ergo, it is my royal decree that my most faithful knight, Sir Sid, shall seek out and rescue my dear friend!"

"As you command, my lord." Sid touched his hand to his breast and bowed the simple bow of a subject.

But then Alvin grabbed his collar and hung on as if to stop him. "Huh? What's wrong, Alvin?" Sid asked.

"I commanded you," she whispered, "but please, don't think so little of me. I would stand on the front line with any of my subjects. I won't be a king that sits back behind guards and lets others do my fighting for me!"

She looked straight into Sid's eyes, her clear blue eyes burning with determination. She shouted, "I'm going with you!"

Isabella whipped around. "Prince Alvin?" she gasped. "What are you saying?"

"Before anything else, Tenko's my friend! I have to go save her. I have no other choice! Right? True, I am borrowing Sir Sid's power...but this is my battle!"

“Prince, if the worst were to happen, what would your people do?”

Alvin fired right back without missing a beat. “I know. I know! But if I do nothing now, I’ll be in no place to fight for my people in the future! If I do nothing now, when my closest friend in the world is in danger, then why would I fight for the rest of my people?!”

“Please do not argue with me for argument’s sake!” Isabella snapped back. She looked at Sid and begged him. “Please, Sir Sid, say something.”

A puff of air escaped his lips. He was—he was laughing! For some reason, he vigorously tousled Alvin’s hair and roared with laughter.

“Sir Sid?” Isabella said.

“You’re just like him, kid!” Sid cried. “Alvin, you really are the spitting image of Arthur. Arthur was always saying the exact same thing, and it caused me no end of trouble, let me tell you that!”

Frantic, Isabella raised her voice. “This is not a laughing matter! Prince, don’t you understand? This is extremely dangerous! What you are about to face is a realm of darkness in which your fairy sword will be weakened. There is no guarantee that you will come back alive!”

“But, Isabella,” Alvin protested, “I’m—”

“Prince Alvin, I understand how you are feeling about Tenko. I really do! But you must know your place. You are our prince, and soon you will be our king!” Alvin gulped. “You must do the right thing. Leave this to be handled by Sid and myself, and stay here to mind the castle. You may be confident in your own skills, but it is still too soon for you to face the forces of darkness!”

Alvin felt a stab of regret at Isabella’s harsh words. Sid chuckled and then nodded in agreement. “Goodness, kid. ‘A knight’s bravery glimmers in their hearts.’ And true, I did teach you that. But you’ve mixed up the meanings of bravery and foolhardiness. When you’re able to look at the situation and your own capabilities objectively and retreat when you should—that, too, is bravery.”

Alvin felt like a child being scolded by her parents. “W-well...” she protested.

Sid gave her a gentle smile and said, “But you’re you, and you are my lord in this present era. Very well, Alvin. You can come with me.”

She looked up and gasped. “Sir Sid?”

Isabella jolted and turned to him too. “Sir, are you in your right state of mind? I repeat, the fairy swords, as followers of the fairy god of light Éclair, are considerably diminished in the domain of darkness! Alvin will only be a burden to you there!” She clenched her fists and hugged them to her chest. “If what we need is more military power for this rescue operation, then I shall swallow my pride and go beg the three dukes. Surely, if I were to sacrifice something of mine to them,

they would lend their cooperation.”

“Don’t do that,” Sid said, shaking his head. “Honestly, out of every fairy knight in the castle that I know, the one who’d be most useful here is Alvin.”

Isabella’s eyes opened wide as she looked at Alvin. “Pardon?” she said.

“Alvin’s still young, but he can use Will already. Even if his fairy sword is less powerful, that shouldn’t be a problem for him. Come to think of it, I bet Alvin would already be better in the domain of darkness than the average knight.”

“Oh...”

He was right. Will did not source power from the fairy sword but rather imbued it with power. By using Will, one managed their own mana in order to enhance their physical abilities. In comparison to normal fairy knights, who relied purely on the mana from their swords, a weakened fairy sword meant little to one who could use Will.

“And besides,” Sid mentioned, almost reluctantly, “if my hunch is correct...then Alvin will be the key to bringing Tenko back—in the full sense of the term.”

“What do you mean?” Isabella asked.

Sid chuckled as Isabella tilted her head in confusion. “Well, at any rate,” he said, turning back to Alvin, “are you really coming with me?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Are you sure? As we keep saying, there’s a chance you could die.”

“Even so, if I sit around now and do nothing, then I am not fit for anything. If I die here, then that shows the extent of my ability as a king.” Alvin looked Sid straight in the eyes. “But I won’t die, and I will rescue Tenko. This is my method of kingship.”

“Well said. Then I shall make no other exceptions, my liege.”

Isabella sighed, half in exasperation. “Your resolve is strong indeed if this is the path you tread to become king. And it seems like just the other day that you were only a child. I have looked away from you for one moment, and you have grown strong in my absence.”

“Isabella...” said Alvin.

“Very well. If this is your will, then I will delay you no further. In allegiance with my old oath, where I swore to protect this country’s future king, I swear on my life to protect you.” She smiled.

“Is this it?” Alvin asked as she, Sid, and Isabella stood in the room Flora had once occupied during her time living with the other First

Squires.

“Yes,” said Isabella. “It is through this wardrobe. And if used normally, it is still only a wardrobe.” She opened the double doors with a creak, showed its empty interior, and then closed it. “Yet, if you use a magical rite and then open it, it does this.” Isabella muttered a few words in Espirish and sketched a magic mark on the doors with her finger. This time, when she opened it, a dense fog spilled out as the doorway to a dungeon appeared.

The dungeon’s walls and floors were paved with old moss-covered stones. It reminded Alvin of the subterranean labyrinth tunnels of the Titans. Inside the tunnel was darkness as pitch black as a ravine, beyond which Alvin had no idea what lay. The eerie silence and chilly air activated her primal fear instincts as she thought of stepping onto the flagstones.

“Wow,” Sid said, impressed. “This must be the dark side’s Fairy Road. It really is something.”

“Indeed.” Isabella shut the wardrobe. She removed a crystal ball from her breast pocket and chanted a few words over it in Espirish. A map materialized within the ball. “This Fairy Road has already been mapped by magic,” she explained.

“I see. Looks pretty complicated,” said Sid.

“According to the map, we are here. It is a straight line from here to the old northern demon kingdom. This means that once you arrive, you may need to pursue the abductors further.”

“Where are the people who took Tenko?” Alvin asked.

“Here.” Isabella pointed. A dot of light slowly moved as it followed their target.

“Hmm. Looks like we still have time,” Sid muttered.

“Indeed. But you mustn’t be complacent. You should hurry.”

“Is there a shortcut?”

“The Fairy Road uses the fairy world hidden on the flip side of the material world. It is a road constructed in the fairy world. Not every point may be connected freely, so I cannot connect you directly to where the abductors are. However, I can connect you to a point from where you may cut them off.”

“Perfect. Then please do, and quickly.”

Isabella answered Sid with a nod. She placed her hands on the wardrobe and began reciting a spell in the old fairy language. After a moment, the wardrobe opened. Then, with a flash, a dazzling path of light appeared, completely unlike the previous road.

“I connected you with a light-side Fairy Road. It will take you to a point from which you may cut off the abductors. Hurry. You have little time to waste.”

“True. All right, let’s get moving,” Sid urged. Yet, just as he was

about to step onto the Fairy Road, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. “Before that,” he raised his voice as he turned back, “what are you doing here?”

He had no idea how they had found out about this whole operation, but all the students from Blitze class came crowding into the room. They all looked at Sid with pleading eyes.

“Instructor...are we not good enough to come with you?” Christopher asked.

“The nerve,” Elaine said, “to attempt to leave without informing us.”

Sid shook his head. “As far as I can tell, only Alvin’s command of Will is strong enough to handle this. You guys still aren’t ready. You would not be able to handle battles in the domain of darkness.”

“You expect us to sit here and do nothing when one of our friends is in danger?” Christopher asked.

“Th-That’s...no fair!” Lynette wailed.

The students slumped, downcast.

“Forget your disappointment,” Sid told them gently. “‘A knight’s sword defends the defenseless. Their power sustains virtue.’ To be weak is to be unable to do anything, yes. But it is also weak to be unable to do what is right.” The students gulped. “Power without justice is merely violence, but justice without power is helpless. Remember this well.”

“Instructor...” they murmured.

“And that means that you still have more progress to make. It is too soon for you now. End of discussion. Leave this to your elders. That’s what elders are for, after all.” Every student in the class gritted their teeth, but they accepted Sid’s lesson.

“Please... Tenko is our friend, so please bring her back safe,” said Elaine.

“I will,” Sid said. “On my reputation as a knight.” He faced his regretful students and gave them a deep, reassuring nod.

Chapter 6: The Tenko Calamity

The dark-side Fairy Road was a complex maze blanketed in deep shadow. The cavernous space and the chill, gloomy air reverberated with the echoes of a deep bass tone emanating from underground. With its lofty ceilings and the roadway zigzagging into infinity, the path seemed to tunnel straight through the center of the world. Endea walked with a grim expression on her face. She hissed impatiently, her thin shoulders bristling. As if to express her displeasure, her strides grew longer and footsteps louder as she took out her frustration on the ground.

“My my, someone’s in a bad mood today,” Flora, walking next to Endea, calmly remarked. She smiled at her. “And after our hard-earned success at that.”

“Do you see that?” Endea asked with a stern sideways glare.

The object of her glare was Tenko, trailing along behind them mutely. However, something was clearly wrong with her. Her eyes were glassy, and her face was devoid of life. For some reason, her squire’s uniform was now dyed pitch black. It was like she was a doll with no agency of her own—or a person with her soul snuffed out by the darkness.

“Well,” Flora admitted, “it is a shame that she did not succumb to her own darkness as my adorable master so wished.” She smiled at Endea in an attempt to placate her prickliness. “But if your true target is Prince Alvin, then is this not an ideal outcome for you?”

“Do you really think it is? Well, then I suppose I don’t need to be so upset now!” Endea burst into laughter. “Serves you right, Alvin! Oh, what I wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall when you find out I’ve stolen Tenko!” Yet, something in all of her laughter suggested she was exaggerating her mirth. Flora silently studied Endea from the corner of her eye.

Eventually, Flora’s lips quirked into a smile, a streak of red drawn across the darkness. “Come, Flora, let’s go!” she said. “We’re off to the north! To my castle!”

“Very well, my adorable master. Let us be off.”

Endea gleefully took the lead. Flora began to follow her but abruptly stopped and gave a little cry of alarm. Without saying another word, she peered up at the ceiling and muttered something.

Endea turned around and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“They’re here,” Flora whispered.

“Who’s here?”

“Sir Sid...along with Alvin and Isabella. I see now. They must be taking a light-side Fairy Road in order to get ahead of us. My assumption is that they must be trying to retake her.” Her eyes flicked to where the doll-like Tenko followed one step behind Endea.

Endea gaped like she didn’t believe Flora. “They’re following us? But how? You said you erased all evidence that we infiltrated their castle!”

“Yes, and I did.” Flora giggled sweetly. “My, isn’t this strange! I certainly thought I had erased our tracks. This Isabella of the Ladies of the Lake must have very perceptive eyes indeed if she could follow us from the very faint marks I could not erase.”

Endea gritted her teeth and then flung her arms around Tenko’s lifeless body. “No!” she cried. “No! She’s mine now! I won’t give her back to Alvin. I won’t!”

Flora giggled again. “There is no need to fear, my adorable master,” she soothed. “If they wish to come and take her back, they must confront us first.”

“Flora!” Endea whined.

“Besides, let us look at it from another perspective. Isn’t this a perfect opportunity for us?” Flora gave Endea an eerie smile.

Endea nodded. “You’re right. I was hoping we could drag this out longer, but you’re right. This is a great opportunity! I can’t wait to see Alvin begging me in tears.” Letting go of Tenko, she puffed out her chest and declared boldly, “And on that note, Flora, you’re in charge of setting all this up! I’m expecting this to be the perfect show of thrilling drama and roaring comedy!”

“Consider it done, my adorable master,” Flora said with a courteous bow. Yet the corners of her mouth still twitched with that same eerie smile.

Several grotesque screams tore through the tunnel and reverberated endlessly down the passageway. These wails originated from the hideous creatures lying in wait for Alvin and the others at the spot where they had entered the dark-side Fairy Road. Some were bugbears, hairy, spherical monsters with gaping mouths, withered tree-branch legs, bear claws, and a single enormous eye. Others were ogres, hideously muscular behemoths, or goblins, repulsive little creatures the size of human children. The monsters hunted those foolish enough to step into their realm, but Alvin did not so much as flinch before fighting back.

“Tayweed!” Alvin roared, and she lunged forward with her sword.

A goblin leaped at her, its club raised for a swing, but it stopped with a grunt as the sword went straight through its throat. She quickly kicked it away and pulled her rapier from its body. A bugbear rushed at her, but she sidestepped it and slashed it as it passed by. Just then, an ogre swung its axe at her from behind. She leaped and, with a flash, sliced the ogre's head clean off. She twisted in midair and swung the rapier again, ripping through several goblins and driving the rest away.

Isabella was almost dumbfounded. "Unbelievable..." she said as she watched Alvin tear through her enemies ferociously. "I am amazed that anyone can fight like this in a domain of darkness. Is this due to the power of Will?"

"Yup, it sure is," Sid said grandly as he stood behind Isabella. "But Alvin's still a novice. He's only barely at the level of a servant from my era."

"You mean to say that he still hasn't reached the level of a squire?" Servants were a now-defunct rank of knighthood that used to wait on and take care of squires as a sort of page.

Basically, they were *apprentice* apprentice knights.

"I mean, everyone in the Blitze class has talent at least," Sid amended. "Although they still can't beat me, even as weakened as I am now."

"I don't think they need to be that strong..."

"No, they do. After all, they need the strength to fight against the demon kingdom in the north, no?"

"You're right," Isabella admitted. She sighed. "This kingdom's rulers truly lack an appropriate sense of danger."

"They have no idea just how frightening our enemies are. How could they? At best, all they've fought are skirmishes with low-level phantom knights or puny dark knights, right?"

"That is correct. They don't know how much danger they're in, so they spend all their time fighting each other," Isabella said, nodding sullenly.

Sid continued. "That's why I'm giving Alvin and his classmates a thorough education. If we can take those considered the weakest and make them strong, then maybe this whole weak system of knights can have a wake-up call too."

"Sir Sid..."

"When the day comes that the knights of this time are strong enough that they don't need a fossil of an older era like me anymore...then that's when my duty will be done. Then I'm sure Arthur will forgive me too."

Isabella understood what he meant. This faction war meant next to nothing to a knight of Sid's caliber. If anything, he viewed the three

ducal factions, which had treated him so inhospitably, as fellow knights protecting the kingdom. The root of all this was nothing but a simple, yet noble, determination to protect what was his duty. Fighting for his duty, and nothing more, defined Sid as a knight.

I wonder why it is that such a great man became known to posterity as a barbarian. Perhaps I should look into this myself, Isabella thought.

“Anyway,” Sid said with a grin, “we don’t have the time to sit around and chat about Alvin’s progress. You’re the one and only leader of the Ladies of the Lake. Want to show us your magic powers?”

“Indeed I shall,” she said, returning his smile with a teasing grin of her own. “Although, I’m afraid I don’t know if my skills will be enough to impress a knight of legend.” She pulled a wand nearly a third of a meter long from her back, raised it aloft, and began chanting a spell in the old fairy tongue. “Maoter, Dansin Izea, Soph Haghings, Ko,” she cried, which meant, “Oh, water that is our mother, give your soft embrace to the dancers!”

This was the characteristic of the half-human, half-fairy Nimue—an enormous store of mana coupled with their power as fairies. Unlike fairy knights, who used incantations as if praying to their fairy swords, the Nimue were able to cast spells directly on their own to change the natural order of the world. This allowed them to use powerful magic even within the realms of darkness.

With one final yell of, “Ko!” the fairy word for, “Go!” Isabella’s spell finished. Numerous spheres of water the size of watermelons materialized around her. She swung her wand, and at the same moment, the enormous orbs shot outward and away from her. They smashed into the faces of the nearby monsters with a great splashing sound, but the water did not spray everywhere. Nor did it drain away to the ground. Instead, the water flowed through the monsters’ mouths, down their throats, and down into their lungs where it coiled like clay. The monsters thrashed, trying to dislodge the choking liquid, but it was only water. There was no way to grasp it. Before long, the monsters collapsed and flailed about on the ground before all movement eventually subsided. Every last one was dead.

“W-wow...” Alvin was almost speechless as she stared at the fairy magic.

“Will that do, Sir Sid?” Isabella asked.

“That was awesome. This display of magic was just as good as, or better, than anything the Nimue in my era could do.”

“You flatter me. I could never hold a candle to the ancient masters.” She beamed at him.

“It’s kinda crazy seeing you smiling like that right after pulling off a brutal attack. Remind me not to make you mad.”

Alvin could do nothing but tremble in fear. Unaware of her reaction, Sid said, “Okay, Alvin, let’s keep going. We don’t have a lot of time.”

“R-Right!”

Isabella led the way, and the party continued down the passage.

Their footsteps echoed down the corridor. Isabella summoned a will-o'-wisp to bob alongside them and light their way as they traveled deeper underground. The dungeon’s twists and turns were extraordinarily complex. Had Isabella not previously acquired a map, they would have been lost wandering its halls for all eternity. If they took a wrong turn, Alvin feared they would never make it out alive. She struggled to quell this fear as they walked.

Turn right at the crossroads...then up these stairs... Go through that tunnel... Fight off the periodic waves of monsters...and on and on it went in the same vein.

Suddenly, the path in front of them ended, and Alvin could see a huge empty space stretching out before them.

Isabella, leading the way with her crystal ball, said, “Someone is ahead.”

Alvin tensed. “Relax,” Sid told her. He walked behind her as the rear guard to protect the party from any sudden attacks. “You’re with me.”

Alvin’s group stepped out into the wide-open space. “Wh-What is this place?” Alvin asked. It looked like a gargantuan pit, but it also reminded her of some sort of cavernous ceremonial site. The hall was ringed with innumerable enormous pillars supporting a ceiling so high it was swallowed up in the gloom. Torches burned here and there, barely keeping the darkness at bay, making it just visible enough to navigate.

“This looks like one of the ritual halls of the Titans,” Sid said. “The fairy world and the material world are two sides of the same coin. Frequently, designs of one world will be carried over and adopted into another.” He looked around as he spoke. Someone stood in the center of the hall with their back to the group, and it looked like—

“Tenko?!” Alvin yelled without thinking.

Hearing the shout, the person—Tenko—whipped around. Yes, it was Tenko. For some reason, her squire’s uniform was covered in something black, but she didn’t appear to be injured at all.

Relieved, Alvin dashed over calling, “Tenko! I’m so glad you’re safe! Oh, I’m so glad.”

Tenko didn’t say anything.

“We came to rescue you! Come on, come with u—” Sid suddenly grabbed Alvin’s arm and held her back. “Sir Sid?”

“Don’t go near her,” he warned.

“What do you mean? Why not?” She looked back and forth from Sid to Tenko. Then, it suddenly hit her. “Tenko?” Tenko looked ready to spring, her hand on the hilt of her sword. She stared at Alvin with an unreadable expression, almost as if she was about to charge. She looked like—

She...wants to kill me. Just as this thought flashed through Alvin’s mind, Sid looked up and said, “All right. Come out now, whoever you are. It’s bad taste to sit up high out of reach and watch someone else do your dirty work for you.”

A disdainful voice from above their heads sneered back, “Oh? Did you see right through me? I suppose that must be why they call you a legendary knight.”

Alvin looked up. There, on top of a nearby pillar cracked clean down the middle, sat a girl with silver hair, a gothic dress, and a crown. She wore a mask over her face that revealed nothing but her eyes, and she leisurely crossed her legs and looked down on them.

“And here I had hoped for an interesting performance. Really, Sir Sid, are you such a boorish barbarian that you don’t even understand how to be my plaything?”

“Who are you?” Alvin asked the mysterious girl.

She looked at Alvin and produced a smile as cold as ice. “Endea. You may call me Endea, Alvin.”

“Wait, you know who I am?”

“Of course I do. Why, I know all about you.” Just then, Endea’s voice lost its jeering edge as her eyes blazed with hatred and rage. “Yes, I know everything about you... Everything... Everything!”

What in the world had Alvin done to provoke such anger? She had no idea! Overwhelmed, she took a step back.

Sid took over for Alvin with a shrug of his shoulders. “Endea, was it? Who are you?”

“Who knows?” she said. “Who do *you* think?”

“That doesn’t answer my question. But fine, it doesn’t matter either way for now.” Sid leveled a steely glare at Endea. “Yeah, I don’t care who you are. Will you give Tenko back?”

She giggled. “Certainly not. The girl is mine now.” Her giggling grew to a full-blown cackling.

“Don’t try to play games with us!” Alvin yelled. “Tenko is her own person! She doesn’t belong to anyone! If you insist otherwise, we’re going to do everything we can to get her back! Understand?” She drew her sword and stood at the ready. Isabella likewise drew her wand and prepared to chant a spell.

Endea only glanced at them with an air of boredom and said, "My goodness, how absurd."

"What's so funny?" Alvin snarled.

"Tenko is her own person. You said so yourself, didn't you? So shouldn't you also be taking her feelings into account?"

Puzzled, Alvin looked over at her friend.

"I'm sure you feel the same way, don't you, Tenko?" Endea said. "I'm much, much, much nicer than Alvin, aren't I? Wouldn't you rather stay with me?"

Tenko's lifeless eyes and wooden face twitched into a smile. "Yes," she pronounced with perfect clarity. "I will become Endea's knight. I'm done with you, Alvin."

Alvin stiffened like she was struck on the back of her head. "What?"

Isabella was at a loss for words. Her eyes widened, but Sid's narrowed.

Endea smiled with glee as she watched Alvin panic. "See?" she gloated.

"But...why?" Alvin began to tremble. "C-Come on, Tenko. This has to be a joke. Right?"

"You think I'm joking?" said Tenko. "Why would I be joking about this? Do you disregard everything that is inconvenient to you as a joke?"

"No, but...this can't be how you really feel. You must be under the influence of some sort of spell."

"Would you be happy if I said I was? Okay, then pretend that I am. Will that make you believe me?"

"What do you mean?"

Tenko was like a completely different person as she scowled at Alvin. "I've had to bear a huge responsibility ever since we were kids. I denied it yesterday, but...the truth is, I was lying to you."

Alvin blanched as Tenko pressed on. "How come I had to be a knight in the first place? Did I have any idea how frightening it was going to be? I'm tired of always being hurt and frightened, Alvin! But no, I always *had* to be your knight! Just because I'm the very last one of my people! Just because, if it wasn't for your pity, I would be dead!"

"What?"

"But still...it would have been fine if you had just stayed powerless! You would have been fine if you had just become a puppet for the three dukes! But no! You're different! You're an idiot who always takes on burdens you don't need and pushes on through the toughest of paths to do what's right! And due to that, you've forced me into being responsible for protecting you and cleaning up all of

your messes after you run around showing everyone what an idiot you are! And I've had enough of that. Leave me out of it! You can go be an idiot all you want, but don't force me to come with you! I hate it, okay? I hate *you!*"

"Tenko...are you joking?"

"No, I'm not. And I'm not just saying this in a fit of anger. This is really how I feel, but of course," Tenko giggled, "you can think I'm being forced to say this if you want."

In that deep gloom, her broken laughter sounded like it came from another person entirely.

"No... I refuse to believe it. Tenko, you and I have been together since we were kids. You said we'd always be together. You said you'd always protect me."

"Didn't I tell you earlier? Those were all lies. I was telling you self-serving lies the whole time. After all, like I said, I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for your pity."



“...No way.”

“But Endea’s different. She’s not like you. She doesn’t assume that I’ll always stay with her, and she actually gives me a second thought.” Here, Tenko turned fond eyes on Endea. “Endea gave me power. It’s the kind of absolute power I can use to force anyone to surrender to me. And now, because of that, I don’t need to be scared anymore. If anything, I’m actually happy. I’m completely free now. She gave me this happiness.” Tenko giggled. “So if I have to pick to go with Endea or with Alvin, isn’t it a no-brainer? Endea’s my true master now.”

Alvin staggered, her mouth gaping. She had always thought of Tenko as her old childhood friend. Magic couldn’t have forced Tenko to say this. Her words ringed of truth. But even then—

“You’re joking,” Alvin repeated. “You must be joking.” She simply couldn’t believe it. She staggered toward Tenko, one wavering step at a time, as tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. “Come on, Tenko, please. Tell me you’re joking,” she begged.

“Fine. I’ll tell you. Am I joking? Here’s my answer.” And then—Tenko *moved*. “Die!” Her sword arm was a blur as she charged forward so quickly she seemed to vanish. In a single moment, she shrunk the distance from Alvin to only ten meters. Then in half a breath, she was upon Alvin and drawing her sword.

Alvin gasped. This was Tenko’s practiced method of unsheathing and attacking in one motion! Her sword sliced through the air toward Alvin’s neck when—smack! The darkness erupted in red.

“Sir Sid?!” Alvin cried.

Sid, leaping in front of Alvin to protect her, grunted as Tenko’s sword cut deep into his back.

Isabella and Alvin gasped. “Tenko, did you really just try to kill me?” Alvin gulped.

“Not only that!” Isabella cried. “What power she must possess to wound Sir Sid!”

It was clear that something extraordinary was happening. Sid was a master of Will, which made his flesh as strong as steel. No ordinary attack could breach it. Even if his students tried with all their might to hurt him, they could not give him so much as a scratch. So for a sword to wound him so deeply...

“I-I’m sorry, Sir Sid... I should have been paying attention.”

But Sid ignored Alvin. He stood exactly where he was, shielding her, and stared fixedly at Tenko—or, rather, at the black sword in her hand.

Unable to hold it back any longer, Endea burst out in raucous laughter and clutched her stomach. “Did you see that? What do you think, Alvin? Tenko said she hates you now! And she said she likes me

better, right? Hey, how does that feel? You thought she was your dear friend, but now she's turned against you and abandoned you. How does that feel, huh? You're pitiful, Alvin, that's what you are! And it's fitting to see you this way. You probably think this is the end of it, huh? Well, guess what, Alvin. I'm only getting started! I'm going to take each and every last little thing away from you!"

"E-Endeaaa!" Alvin howled in rage and frustration. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

And then—

"Is that...a black fairy sword?" Sid whispered.

Endea's laughter abruptly broke off.

"Endea, was it?" Sid asked. "You made Tenko take a black fairy sword, didn't you?"

For a moment, Endea only looked up at the ceiling and kept silent. Then she said, "Sure, and so what if I did? Well? What are you going to do about it, Sid the Barbarian?" She glared at him with all the hatred of a longtime rival.

"I figured. Alvin, Tenko's sudden change is caused by that black fairy sword."

"What's a black fairy sword?" Alvin blinked the tears out of her eyes as she looked up at him.

Sid continued to stare at the sword in Tenko's hand. Its blade was a sinister black. "Similarly to how you have your three colored fairy swords granted to you by Éclair, Opus grants their own fairy sword too... Fear, anger, hatred, anxiety... All of these negative emotions become rooted in these swords. Anyone who picks up one of these swords has their negative emotions amplified and becomes a slave to them. They feel like nothing will bring them greater pleasure than to hurt and kill others. They are not people any longer. They are monsters. This is how dark knights are created."

"No way... so is Tenko like this because of the sword?" Alvin asked Sid. There was a sliver of hope in her voice.

But—

"No." Sid shook his head. "That's a part of it but not all of it. Black fairy swords amplify the darkness in someone's heart." He paused and then struggled on. "But it can't amplify what isn't already there."

"Does...that mean...?"

"Yeah. To some extent, the Tenko you're seeing right now is representative of how she truly feels."

Alvin gasped. If only Tenko was being controlled by some kind of magic! Alvin slumped, her faint hopes shattered.

Yet Sid placed a hand on her head. "Don't get discouraged. Everyone has some kind of darkness in their heart. I'm sure you

do...and hey, I know I do too. Our hearts are weak, after all. But that's what the knight's code is for."

"Sir Sid?" Alvin asked, taken aback.

Sid left Alvin where she was and stepped forward. "Endea," he called. "Sorry about this, but I'm going to ask for Tenko back."

"No," she snapped with an impertinent sniff. "Weren't you listening? Tenko says she prefers me over Alvin. She wielded the sword on her own, which means that, in the end, she would prefer me anyway—"

"That's not true," said Sid.

Endea went silent.

"I'm guessing you tried to tempt her with a black sword at first, but judging by all the blood in her room, she refused to take it. To deal with that, you stabbed her through the soul with the black sword and used it to assimilate her Will. Am I right?"

"What? Absolutely not. I did no such thing. Tenko chose to join me of her own free wi—"

"That's not true either."

Endea gritted her teeth in the face of Sid's absolute conviction. "How do you know?! Stop asking me these leading questions!"

"How do I know? Because I've seen the same thing play out before."

"What are you talking about, Barbarian?"

Sid ignored her. "My real question is about what you're after. Why did you abduct Tenko? And why did you tell such an obvious lie and say she joined you voluntarily?"

Endea was at a loss for words, but Sid continued his line of questioning. "Sure, Tenko has the ability to be an incredible dark knight. I could see you wanting to expand your military power by recruiting her, but in that case, there'd be no reason to lie about it."

"Shut up," she snapped in a frigid voice. Her expression instantly changed from relaxed to deadly serious.

Yet Sid paid her no attention and continued twisting the dagger into her with his reasoning. "Let me see... My guess is that you saw that Alvin had such a good friend in Tenko and were jealous. Am I wrong? That means you're—"

Endea's eyes erupted with fury. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" she screamed.

Alvin blinked in shock at this sudden transformation.

"Me? Jealous?! Don't be a fool! You don't know what you're talking about! I'm not... I'm not... Argh! Okay, fine! I was going to avoid this and only take Tenko. But! Now that you're all here, you'll die! I'll kill everyone on Alvin's side!" Endea shrieked like a spoiled child. Her screams echoed off the walls of the cavernous hall.

“I shan’t let that happen!” Isabella cried, readying her wand and pointing it at Endea. “Teip, Teip, Teip!” Yet, just as she began chanting the Espirish spell to bind in place, a sudden voice loomed out of the darkness at Isabella’s side.

“My, my, Lady Isabella. It is so horribly rude of you to interrupt.”

A person materialized out of the darkness with a wand directed right at Isabella. Isabella broke off her spell mid-chant and pointed her wand at this figure. Their light and dark mana clashed in an eruption of sparks, illuminating the shadowy figure. It was—

“Flora?!”

Flora giggled. “Is it not more befitting for one magic user to fight another? Since time immemorial, we witches have always worked behind the scenes. Our very existence is more dangerous than brute combat.”

Wand crossed with Isabella’s, she chanted in Espirish, “Kam Da Dell Looking Darks,” which meant, “Come, creatures who dwell in the darkness, bare your poisonous fangs!” whereupon a disquieting writhing sound came from the shadows at Flora’s feet.

Then they poured out of the darkness—snakes, spiders, centipedes, toads, and every kind of poisonous bug imaginable—a repulsive, teeming tidal wave advancing on Isabella.

“Holia El Udia!” Isabella cried, which meant, “Repel this magic, oh holy tree!” A holly sapling sprung up from the ground at Isabella’s feet and grew rapidly. The instant the fell creatures touched the sacred holly’s thorns, they were consumed with a puff of white smoke.

“My, my,” Flora commented. “I had no idea the Lady Isabella could perform such magical spells in this day and age. Then perhaps it’s time to resort to...this. Mekia!” which meant, “Black flames!” The end of Flora’s wand erupted in black fire.

“Creata!” which meant, “Purifying water!” A fountain of holy water gushed from Isabella’s wand.

The battle of the extraordinarily talented magic users—the witch vs. the Lady of the Lake—now began.

“Sir Sid!” Isabella called, sparing him a backward glance. “I will drive back Flora at all costs! Protect Prince Alvin, please!” Whoosh! She pushed Flora away from the others.

“All right,” Sid said. “I’ll trust you to handle her.” Then he turned forward to face his own opponent.

Tenko stood there and said not a word. She stared fixedly at Alvin in a deep, low stance, ready to draw her sword and attack in a single movement. Dark mana and bloodlust filled her eyes.

Unsure of what to do, Alvin looked from Sid to Tenko and back, comparing the two. “Tenko...” she murmured.

Sid stepped forward to protect Alvin from any attack. “Hey,

Tenko,” he said. “Wasn’t it a dark knight who murdered your mother and your people?”

“Oh, now that you mention it, that’s right,” she said. “Oh well. That was their fault for being weak, I’m sure.”

“Weren’t you afraid of fighting them?”

“Sure, I used to be. A long time ago.” Her mouth twisted into a slight smile. “But I’m not scared now. Not one bit.”

Sid was silent.

“You understand why, don’t you? Just look at how powerful I am now.” The black sword’s awe-inspiring power thrummed through Tenko. “This black sword is amazing, don’t you think? Honestly, I’m not even remotely concerned about facing you. I’m sure I’m much stronger.”

Sid, again, said nothing.

Tenko laughed. “Why did I ever try to avoid the darkness? I wasted so much effort trying to be strong. But now...now it’s all easy.” She was ecstatic, drunk on her own power.

Sid sighed. “That dumb kid. She’s letting the darkness overcome her.”

“Sir Sid, what should we do?” Alvin asked. “Is there a way to bring Tenko back to her senses?”

But the answer to that question was—

“Nope,” called Endea, from her position as a spectator. “Weren’t you aware? Once you pick up a black fairy sword, your soul is eaten up by darkness. You can never be the same person you once were. That means Tenko’s mine now!”

“No way!”

Endea cackled. “Now isn’t this a sight to see! I wonder what your corpses will look like once my Tenko’s given you all a painful death!”

Alvin trembled with hopelessness and frustration.

“Stay back,” Sid commanded Alvin in a strong voice. “We still have a chance.”

Endea’s eyebrows twitched in surprise. “What are you talking about? Are you stupid? Are you sure you’re really a legendary knight?” She made no move to hide her extreme irritation at him. “Tell me, have you ever heard of anyone becoming a dark knight and then returning to who they were before?”

Sid did not respond. His face was unreadable. Endea smirked down at him once she realized he knew she was correct.

Alvin bit her lip. *Endea’s right*, she thought. *I’ve never heard of anyone who became a dark knight and then returned to their senses. Then that must mean it’s too late for Tenko too!*

Too late. Too late. All the images cycling through Alvin’s mind vanished: Tenko’s smile, all the many days they spent together, all

memories as fragile as glass, now shattered and scattering in the wind. Alvin felt like the ground beneath her feet was crumbling away, but then Sid spoke, and she remembered.

“A knight speaks only the truth,” Sir Sid recited the ancient knights’ pledge.

“Sir Sid?”

“Did you forget, Alvin? I promised you. I swore I’d bring her back.” Sid stood before her, stalwart and monumental.

“Oh...” There was nothing she could do but stand there in mute amazement.

“But this time, I need your strength too, my lord.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll set it up for you, but you need to make the final move. As Tenko’s lord, you’re the only one who can do this. It’s important for you and Tenko both.”

“You mean me? But what can I do?”

“You’ll know when the time comes. Do what your heart tells you.”

Then Sid stepped out and faced Tenko once more.

Fed up, Endea said, “Okay, okay! Enough with the speeches already.”

“Sure,” said Sid. “Fine by me. Let’s get started.”

Endea screamed hysterically, “Hmph! Fine! Okay, Tenko, my loyal dark knight. Hear my command and obey. Strike down all these fools who dare oppose me! You are now strong enough to do so!”

“As you command,” Tenko said, and in that same instant, she crouched down as low as she could go and charged toward Sid like a flying arrow. Without slowing down even the slightest bit, she drew her sword and slashed it in a single stroke, leaving an afterimage in her wake.

Sid grunted as he stopped the blow with his fist. There was a momentary sound of an impact, and then a shock wave emanated from it and scattered to the edges of the room.

Alvin shielded her eyes with her arms from the resulting wind and gulped.

“Jeez... With this, it’s going to be the second time,” Sid said with a bold smile as he glared at Tenko from point-blank range. “Oh well, I’ll do it as many times as it takes as long as it’s for my lord.”

They leaped apart simultaneously, as if the timing was arranged beforehand. They then rushed to attack each other head-on.

Tenko roared in fury as she charged in a straight line toward Sid, her body overflowing with mana. She was the first to strike. Holding her sword overhead, she struck down like a lightning bolt aimed at

the crown of Sid's head. Her sword blade brimmed with a truly frightening amount of dark mana.

Sid twisted out of the way with a grunt and then returned a stinging fist. Tenko parried his fist with unbelievable speed. At the same instant, she laughed, took half a step forward, and drove her sword deep into his chest. Blood spurted over the heads of the combatants.

Sid yelped. For a moment, he looked like he was about to leap back, but Tenko yelled, "You're not getting away that easily!" Matching him stride for stride, she blocked his retreat. Then, with a whirl and a roar, she came back for her third attack. With a low sword sweep, she spun on her left leg, leaped, and whirled into the air for a spinning overhead attack. Whack! Whack! Sid cried out again as enormous flowers of blood bloomed on the ground.

He flew backward, his body oozing blood from his various wounds. Tenko's hair and clothes were drenched in his blood. Sid smacked into a pillar, which crumbled on impact, raining dust and debris down on his head.

"Sir Sid?!" Alvin cried.

But just then, a flash! A bolt of lightning streaked across the ground from the other side of the dust. Sid leaped atop the lightning bolt and charged toward Tenko. This was Sid, the Lightning Knight of legend! Sid and the lightning both tore through the darkness and lunged toward Tenko.

However, in the next moment, Tenko suddenly warped and collapsed into a pool of shadows. Then, as Sid's Lightning Legs ran out, he momentarily stopped, and at his back—slash! Tenko leaped down from above and struck Sid square in the back.

"Try harder!" she taunted. "That was the black fairy sword's Dream Moon. It was only an illusion!" She twirled in midair and delivered a ferocious kick to Sid's injured back as she landed.

Sid groaned and tumbled to the ground. He quickly stuck out a hand to catch himself, and he lurched back onto his feet to face Tenko once more. He clicked his tongue under his breath. The battle hadn't even lasted a minute yet, but Sid was already torn up and bloody.

"Is that it?" Tenko asked haughtily. "Is that all it takes to defeat my so-called powerful teacher? What a disappointment." Her eyes were filled with contempt as she readied her sword once more.

Alvin couldn't believe what was happening. Was Tenko really overpowering Sid where he stood? "It's impossible," she breathed. "She can't be so strong that even Sir Sid can't defeat her!" She was dumbfounded.

Endea, perched in an alcove, howled with laughter that rang off the walls. "Are you surprised? What do you think? This is the power

of a black fairy sword, a power of the very same darkness you eschew! I must say, it is rare for someone to become as strong as she has during their first time with a black fairy sword. Tenko must have been made to be a dark knight! How fitting, then, that I'm her master!"

"No way!"

Endea explained gleefully, "Not only is she a natural, but this domain of darkness enhances the sword's shadow powers. Even the so-called Barbarian is powerless to stop her! Now behold!"

Tenko bellowed and rushed at Sid with blinding speed, drawing her sword and attacking with it in one single flash of horizontal movement. As she passed by, she carved a stinging line into his side. Splash! Another enormous spray of blood. Sid staggered and then collapsed.

Alvin screamed. She desperately fought the urge to turn away from the terrible sight.

Endea's face stretched into a gleeful grin that spread from ear to ear. "I knew you could do it, Tenko!" she cried. "What, is that all the Barbarian has to offer? That was barely anything!" She collapsed into loud, discordant laughter.

Tenko roared again and charged at Sid once more. He stayed on the defensive as she attacked again, and again, and again. She slashed at his side, stabbed his shoulder, hacked, slivered, and sliced. All at once, Sid's whole body became covered in blood.

Alvin stood there in horror. *He can barely get a move in edgewise*, she thought. Tenko bore down on him again and again. Even a legendary magical warrior could do nothing against this demonic power. Alvin didn't need to think long before she realized the truth: Tenko was stronger than Sid.

Sir Sid must be after something, she thought, *but...this can't be his plan!* It should have been impossible for Tenko to be this good. Was the fairy sword's power just that strong? Or maybe—*Does Tenko really have this much darkness in her heart?* After all, Alvin knew that black fairy swords turned the darkness in people's hearts into power. Was this Tenko's own terrible power? Was she strong enough to deliver Sir Sid a crushing defeat?

Ultimately...I only ever thought of myself. Now she could see it clearly. She had taken advantage of Tenko. *Even that day in the rain... All I thought about was my own happiness from her deciding to be my knight, after all. I never considered Tenko's true feelings.* Consumed with regret, Alvin gripped the hilt of her sword. *I must take the throne as a man...and even with few supporters, I must bear this heavy responsibility, but I selfishly assumed I could rely on my old friend Tenko*

unconditionally. I just wished that we could always be together, and because of that, I closed my eyes to all the pain she was going through. I've taken complete advantage of her the whole time! And this was the result of her self-centered actions.

Tenko laughed. "You're weak!" she crowed. "You're too weak to beat me, Sir Sid! And now look at me! I'm strong now, even without you. This is my true power!"

Yes. The result indeed—this twisted version of Tenko, who took such pleasure in tormenting Sid. There was no trace of the kind and noble girl she had once been.

Once a person turns into a dark knight, Alvin reminded herself, they can never return to who they were... Would Tenko soon follow the lead of all the other dark knights, become consumed by her own greed, and transform into a bloodstained, massacring monster? Tenko was already this powerful simply from picking up the fairy sword. What would happen when she became a full dark knight? It was unthinkable. With her level of ability and ferocity, Tenko would be a threat like no other. Alvin couldn't even imagine how many of her soldiers would fall at Tenko's hands if she joined the dark army.

So that means...instead... Gripped with bitter anguish, Alvin drew her sword. Alvin was the one who would be king. Sometimes, a king had no choice but to make cruel decisions for the good of the people. It was their duty. They could not flee or force others to shoulder this burden. *If Tenko becomes an enemy of my people...if she murders innocents...then it is my duty to end her by my hand!*

Her vision blurred with tears as she stared at Tenko, who was completely engrossed with attacking Sid to the point that the outside world barely existed to her. Looking up, Alvin saw that Endea, too, paid her no attention, instead watching the battle with great glee. Isabella and Flora were likewise engaged in their magic battle off to the side. No one paid any attention to Alvin, which meant she was free to move.

That meant—*If I deal her a sudden blow in just the right spot, I might stand a chance at bringing her down.* She could kill Tenko. She could cut down the friend she had spent so much time with, the one with whom she had shared good times and bad alike. The mere thought of it made her tremble. She wanted nothing more than to hide her face, scream, and sob her heart out. Why had it come to this? She wouldn't even have minded, really, if Tenko hadn't become her knight, after all. The sole thing she wanted was to be with her. She could handle any sort of hardship, any sort of problem, so long as Tenko was with her. *But!* she thought. *Now I need to... Now I need to kill her!*

Though her legs quaked, she watched Sid and Tenko's battle attentively. What she needed was a crack in Tenko's armor, an instant

in which her back would be exposed. At that moment, if Alvin ran as fast as she could, she could stab Tenko through the heart, and it would all be over.

I...am the king. And that is why...I need...to protect my people! I need to!

She watched. Quietly, Alvin began burning her Will, sharpening her senses to their limits as she watched Tenko. This was a one-sided massacre. Every time Tenko's sword whirled, a new spurt of blood flew from Sid's body. Both sides understood that only one person determined the tide of this battle. Like dancers, their positions kept changing, shifting, and then—

There. The flow of battle would carry Tenko to a place where her back would be turned. There. Tenko would wind up, putting her whole body and soul into the next attack against Sid. There. She would only be some ten, twenty meters away. With all her nerves hyper focused, Alvin waited for the one single instant before Tenko made impact. There. Time stood still as she concentrated. And Alvin—Alvin resigned herself to her tragic fate. *I'm so sorry. Goodbye...Tenko.*

There. Alvin launched at Tenko's back. She cleared the ground between them like a speeding arrow. Alvin was convinced of one thing. As powerful as Tenko was with the fairy sword, she lacked the cunning of more veteran soldiers. She was still only halfway to becoming a knight, after all. That made her leave her guard down long enough for Alvin to catch her unawares and deliver a fatal blow. It was the moment of certain death for Tenko.

But Alvin didn't move. No, she couldn't move. Alvin gasped and looked down to see what had stopped her from finishing Tenko off. It was...Sid! Sid made eye contact with her from the other side of Tenko, with the fire of his will hiding in his eyes. Tenko was about to tear into him with her earnest attack, but Sid only had eyes for Alvin. His eyes were telling her a message.

Oh. Suddenly, she felt ashamed. She had only been thinking of herself again and, drunk on heroics, charged headlong into the worst decision possible. She was horribly, horribly ashamed. *What am I doing?* she asked herself. Then suddenly her mind cleared.

Remember what Sir Sid said? A knight speaks only the truth. How dare I distrust him, my loyal subject, and go off on my own to make this decision? I'm a failure of a king. Alvin bit her lip, turned her sword over in her hands, and thrust it down into the earth. Even then, Sid ignored his battle and continued to look straight into her eyes.

No words came out of Alvin's mouth, but her eyes pleaded with him and sent the message, "I trust you." Even in the midst of the battle, Sid's lips quirked into a small smile. Then he dodged Tenko's incoming attack.

Sid and Tenko's battle dragged on and on, and all Alvin could do was watch. Tenko brought her sword down in an overhead strike, which Sid caught with his crossed arms. The sword bit into the flesh, scattering blood. Tenko nimbly counterattacked with a whirling slash at his legs. He immediately leaped back but could not dodge in time, and blood gushed from his thighs. She did not pause before leaping into a whirling diagonal attack that caught Sid squarely on the chest. He staggered and fell over as blood poured from his torso.

There stood Alvin, involuntarily holding her breath. Endea was cheering for joy, and Sid silently pulled himself to his feet and put up his guard once more because Tenko was already closing in for another onslaught. Her sword flew like a dancer, slashing, slashing, slashing. Sid tried to ward off her attacks with his fist but was unable to stop them all. Little by little, the wounds kept coming and the blood kept pouring.

In the midst of the onslaught, Sid barely managed to lash out with his fist for a counterattack, yet at that moment, the ridges on Tenko's sword clipped his hand for a brutal counter. Sid's hand split open, but Tenko's sword was already on the move again, simultaneously cutting into his shoulder.

With a jerk, Sid staggered as pain warped his features. Tenko leveled a slightly chilling smirk at him. Once again, she threw herself back into an even fiercer offensive.

A crash of sword and fist here. Fist meeting sword there. Another collision of sword and fist. As Sid blocked Tenko yet again, she leaped back and began chanting in Espirish. A black flame erupted from the end of her sword and joined the onslaught. The impact and searing heat of this whirling firestorm enveloped Sid, scorching him. Unable to stand it any longer, Sid leaped away, but Tenko had anticipated his retreat and met him with a graceful swing of her sword. Slash! Sid's back exploded in blood.

Blood.

Blood.

Blood.

Alvin's vision filled with blood. She gripped the hilt of her sword from where she had thrust it into the ground as she watched the carnage. Tenko continued carving away at Sid as if this was a show for Alvin. Slash, withdraw, strike, withdraw, stab, withdraw—one quick blow and momentary separation, then slash, slash, slash. Tenko darted all around, now here, now gone, now there, now gone, leaving afterimages and fresh wounds in her wake.

Yet, no matter how she wounded him, he continued to turn and

face her head-on. No matter how many times she brought him to his knees, no matter how many times she knocked him to the ground, no matter how many times she sent him flying, Sid's sole response was to stand back up and face her, continuing the battle once more. It was plainly clear this was a battle he could not win, and yet he continued to face her as obediently as a puppet on a string.

Endea clapped her hands in delight at the futility of Sid's situation. Tenko laughed cruelly at the comical sight of Sid. Every time he stood back up, she grew stronger and more ferocious, raining slashing attacks down on him. She slashed into him like he was a training dummy.

Alvin watched this ghastly sight, straining to ignore every impulse that told her to look away. She watched as she trembled, her face contorting in anguish. She watched as she resisted the desperate urge to leap into battle at his side. Why? Because there he was—Sir Sid, still standing, still fighting. The man who swore his loyalty to Alvin, the man who was Alvin's first knight, still fought. The man whose eloquence trumped all when he commanded her to trust in him. The man who, dripping blood from multiple wounds, threw himself back into the fight again and again.

Alvin gritted her teeth. She had no choice but to fight against herself and stay put. If need be, she would believe in him until the end and confirm with her own eyes that there was no more hope. Every attack on Sid pained Alvin like it was a wound in her heart. But that was only her own weakness, she reminded herself, and she set her jaw. Compared to Sid's injuries, hers wasn't even worth being labeled as pain. *Sir Sid!* Alvin thought. There was nothing she could do, save for one thing: watch. Watch and believe in Sid. Through everything, believe in Sid.

Sir Sid! Sir Sid! She wanted to tear her eyes away from this horrible sight, but she did not let them waver once. It was the only thing she could do for him in this battle. And then—

The moment finally arrived.

Tenko roared as she dove in like a whirlwind and landed an especially deep rising slash. She put the force of her entire body into this critical hit. Sid gasped as a huge font of blood sprayed into the air. Completely devoid of strength, he turned limp and let gravity pull him to the ground with a thud. With no move to defend himself, he bounced once, twice, three times, and then finally rolled to a stop. His body lay on the ground as limply as an abandoned rag doll. He made no sound and moved no muscle. He didn't even look like he was breathing.

Alvin's patience finally hit its limit. Without thinking, she screamed, "Sir Sid?!" She rushed over to his fallen body. Yet, before she could reach him—

"Where do you think you're going, Alvin?" Like a gale, Tenko stormed in to bar Alvin's way.

"Tenko?" Alvin cried.

"What do you think? How does it feel to know that your oh-so-precious knight is defeated, and he couldn't do a thing to stop me?" She turned the point of her sword upon Alvin. "But no need to worry," she said, "since you're next."

Alvin involuntarily gulped and stepped back, alarmed by the look of bloodlust aimed at her.

"How pathetic, Barbarian," Endea jeered. "I must say, I'm disappointed you didn't put up a better fight!" She laughed.

"What?" Isabella cried with a scream of grief. "Do you mean that even Sir Sid is no match for a black fairy sword?"

Flora turned her wand on Isabella. "I'm afraid you do not have the luxury of worrying about anyone but yourself right now."

A wave of creeping black briars surged out of the ground and crawled forward, reaching for Isabella. She cried, "Stay back!" and raised her wand, creating a burst of flames that burned the thorns away. Flora and Isabella's magical battle continued with neither side appearing to gain the upper hand. Isabella's beautiful features contorted in despair.

And in the midst of all this, Tenko simply stood there giggling. "Ah!" she cried. "I feel so much better now! Honestly, I have to say...I could never stand your Sir Sid."

Alvin blinked in surprise at Tenko's hateful glare. "T-Tenko?"

"A barbarian? The strongest knight in history? Please! I was there for you long, long before he ever came into the picture!"

Alvin gasped. "Huh?!"

"But look how easily he stole my position as your first knight, as your most trusted person! I've been in agony, all because you selfishly decided to bring that barbarian into the picture. Do you understand what I've been through?"

"Oh..."

"I've always carried this responsibility for you and worked as hard as I could for you! But you still turned your back on me! You betrayed me!"

Alvin was speechless, and Tenko's fury brought tears to her eyes. This, too, must have been part of Tenko's true feelings. Alvin had no response but to sit there silently and let it all wash over her.

"But it's all okay now," Tenko said, "because now I have Endea." She smiled as if all her pain was gone and forgotten. "Endea's not like

you, Alvin. She gave me this incredible power and took away all my pain and fear! Now I understand—I was born to serve Endea!” As she screamed with laughter, the last traces of the noble girl she once was vanished.

It’s too late, Alvin thought. *She’s evil now*. The Tenko she used to be would never return. She was fallen now, like any other dark knight. This despair dominated Alvin’s mind.

“It will soon be time for you to say farewell, Alvin,” said Tenko. She readied herself in a mid-level stance as her whole body surged with mana and bloodlust.

“Tenko...I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I...” Alvin’s head drooped. The will to resist was lost in her.

“It’s too late for apologies,” Tenko said. She began to advance on Alvin, and then—

Whoosh! Suddenly, a person stood before her to block Tenko’s way. It was Sid.

“Wha—” Tenko spluttered.

“S-Sir Sid?!” cried Alvin.

“Th-This has to be a joke!” said Endea, unable to believe her eyes.

Barely able to stand on his own legs, covered in blood, and torn to shreds, Sid was in no condition to fight. His knees tottered, and he looked as if the touch from a single finger would be enough to topple him over. And yet, there he stood, facing Tenko.

“Y-You’re still standing?” she said. Her voice wavered as she watched him struggle to stay upright. “You’re torn up and wiped out, but you’re still trying to fight?”

Sid wiped away a trail of blood from the corner of his mouth and then boldly said, “Tenko. Is this really what you think of me?”

Tenko’s fox ears flicked as she frowned.

Sid chuckled and then continued. “I figured. I thought the same thing too once.”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“I thought my mentor was insanely strong too.” As Tenko trembled before him, Sid gave an odd shrug of his shoulders. “I couldn’t compete with him, no matter what I tried. It drove me up the wall, and he was a major thorn in my side. I thought that someday, if I could only just use some cheap trick, I’d get him for sure.”

“Wh-What are you going on about?” Tenko snapped. “Are you... Are you still trying to play the role of my mentor?!”

“I’m not playing any role,” Sid said with a grin. “I *am* your mentor.”

“What in the world... What in the world are you saying?” Her grip tightened on the hilt of her sword. “Didn’t you already give up on me long ago?”

“Me, give up on you? Don’t be a fool. I’d never give up on you.”

“What?! How dare you stand there and claim that!” Tenko bashed the ground with her sword in anger.

Sid declared bluntly, “‘A knight speaks only the truth.’ I swore to you that night that I’d never give up on you. No matter what you may become, I am still a knight, and I will fulfill my oath.”

His words had a strong power to them. Tenko let out a small, “Ah...” as she momentarily stiffened. Her face twisted in anguish, and she looked as if something was troubling her.

“Huh?” Alvin said. “Tenko? What’s happening?” This sudden change in Tenko, who up until now was unmoved by any of their words, astonished Alvin. *How strange, she thought. I thought once someone became a dark knight, they could never go back! But then why is Tenko shaking like that?*

Ignoring Alvin, Sid continued. “Honestly, compared to the state I left my mentor in, this little teenage rebellion of yours is pretty cute.”

Tenko groaned.

“Well, this is a good opportunity to let out all the feelings you’ve bottled up, I figure. Come on, let them out on me. I can handle it...since I’m your mentor.”

“No, I’m... I’m... I’m...”

Based on the number and severity of his injuries, Sid was clearly losing the battle. And yet, for some reason, it was like he had completely turned the tide.

Endea shrieked hysterically, “Wh-What are you doing, Tenko? Aren’t you my knight?! Hurry and finish them off! What, do you want to go back to always being afraid and in pain?”

Tenko gasped, and Endea’s scolding dropped her face back into darkness once more. However, her stance clearly lacked the ferocity she had displayed previously.

“Great, so it’s already affected her,” Sid grumbled with a look like he’d seen this all before. “Alvin, it’s almost time for you to step in. You think you can handle Tenko from here?”

“Huh?” Alvin said, gobsmacked.

“I will use my black fairy sword Lunar Eclipse and show you my true power!” Tenko cried. She swung her sword, and with one fluid motion, returned it to its scabbard. “De Darmoon El Naitonaito,” meaning, “Thou art a black, a black deeper than shadow, moon that shines in the dead of night.” Whispering in Espirish, she moved into a low, deep stance from where she could draw her sword and end Sid in the same motion.

Suddenly, Alvin felt a strange heaviness begin to tug on her. A geyser of mana erupted from Tenko and sprayed the surrounding area black as pitch. Alvin lost all concept of what was up and what was

down as the whole world around her turned to black.

“Clau Steg Hora Specias!” which meant, “May your fangs tear a gaping hole in the world!”

Tenko’s presence swelled infinitely as more and more mana poured from her. An enormous moon the color of a deep pool of water materialized above her head—an evil moon, a moon as pure black as an empty abyss. The black moonlight emanating from it was unbearable. Reason could not explain why, but instinct alone knew it. The moon brought with it an intense premonition of death.

“Ripald Roothlass!” or, “Become a merciless killer!” And then the moon was complete.

Its ominous presence dominated everything. Without a doubt, Tenko had used—“A-A Greater Incantation?!” Alvin cried in astonishment. “Did she make that with the black sword? I had no idea Tenko could do that yet!”

Endea rejoiced with laughter. “Bravo, Tenko! You are a masterful dark knight already!”

Alvin panicked. “R-Run, Sir Sid! Even you can’t stand against that!”

Sid continued to face Tenko straight on. “Believe in me!” he commanded in a powerful, reassuring voice.

As he did so, Tenko’s mana grew, grew, grew—her presence swelling to that of a Titan’s—and then her whole spirit was ready to fire like a lethal nocked arrow. Then she charged.

“Black Greater Incantation—Sky Severing Evil Moon!” She rushed at Sid, unleashing all of her amassed energy. Exploding with dark mana, Tenko sped forward until she moved like a black flash of light. Her speed tore the ground and rent the air itself, leaving vacuums that soon filled with darkness in her wake.

In this deadly space, Tenko was king. No defense served any protection, and no evasion was possible under the black moon, for its radiance produced a killing effect. Tenko surged up to Sid and drew her sword once she was within range. The naked blade sketched a line through the air, and she dove at Sid.

Sid stood on his guard, facing down her strike without moving even the slightest bit. And then her sword sliced into him and the moon overhead.

Alvin screamed. “S-Sir Sid?!”

As the moon separated into two pieces, the world returned to normal. However, Sid’s body was torn deeply, spraying a huge splash of blood that splattered all over Tenko’s body and her sword.

No. This was it. It was finally over. Alvin gritted her teeth. And just then—whoosh! Suddenly, Tenko’s bloodstained sword burst into dazzling, white flames. Tenko screamed, and as she did, the blood

covering her body also ignited in a great white ball of flame. However, the fire did not burn Tenko herself but instead purified her, scorching away the darkness clinging to her. Tenko screamed, and as the flames grew stronger, they engulfed her sword, destroying it and burning away all of its destructive evil power.

“What’s happening?” Endea cried. “What in the world is that white fire?” She blinked in surprise. This was outside even the realm of her imagination.

What Alvin saw made her blink in surprise as well. Across the battlefield, Sid slowly crumbled to a heap, all of his power exhausted...and yet a soundless whisper reached Alvin’s ears.

There. His lips moved, spelling out a single syllable... *Go. Go!*

“Oh...” At hearing his message, Alvin leaped into action.

“Wh-What is this?!” Tenko howled. “My black fairy sword...is crumbling!” Tenko forgot that she was in the middle of a battle and began to panic. However, even in the midst of her distress, the darkness clouding her eyes receded little by little, and the light of reason began to return. “What... What have I done?”

“What are you doing, Tenko?!” Endea shrilled. “You can’t go back to who you used to be!”

Tenko gasped.

“You’re my knight now, aren’t you? Weren’t you going to become my knight? Do you really want to go back to always being scared and in pain? Don’t you want to be strong?”

“I-I do. I...” Tenko tightened her grip on her sword again, and the black mana welled up in her once more. It flooded through her body, threatening to extinguish the white fire as her eyes clouded over again. Endea sighed in relief.

But then, a scream shook the air. Alvin charged Tenko with her sword aloft, roaring as she went, flying as if propelled by a kick to the backside. She burned every scrap of Will that she had and ran straight toward Tenko. “Tenkoooooooo!”

Tenko gasped and raised her sword to guard. Confusion, unease, and agony swirled in her eyes as she looked at Alvin, and once again, she drew on the dark mana from her sword.

“A-Alvin!” she cried. “I’m going to... I’m going to hurt you!” The sword’s power spiked, driving away the last of the flames, when—

“I don’t care! Even if you do, you’re still my best friend in the whole world!” Alvin yelled.

“Oh!” For a moment, Tenko’s movements stopped as if she was befuddled. The flow of mana in her sword likewise stopped.

Then, in the next instant, Alvin’s sword smashed into Tenko’s head-on. Blade locked against blade. Black and white mana clashed in

a shower of sparks. The wind from the impact whirled away in all directions, and they leaped apart.

And then, crack! A dry, metallic sound echoed through the air, and Tenko's katana—her black fairy sword—shattered at the base. Tenko stood dumbfounded as Alvin passed behind her, sword drawn.

Then, in the next instant—whoosh! The darkness cloaking her body vanished, and the thick cloud of darkness at the base of her sword dissipated. For a long moment, Tenko only stood bolt upright, staring at it in stunned silence before she finally muttered, "I-I can't believe..."

Tears spilled from her eyes. "I can't believe it. What was I doing?" She fell to her knees, staring at her hands. "Wh-Why did I do such a terrible thing?" The darkness clung to her no longer as she whispered in a daze. Tenko had finally returned to her senses.

"Hey. Are you awake from your nightmare now? Rise and shine, sleepyhead." A large hand reached down and stroked Tenko's head. She lifted her eyes, and there stood Sid, back on his two feet again. He was cut up and bloody, but he didn't even seem to feel it. His sole attention was focused on her.

She was unsure of what to say. "M-Master...?" she mumbled, her eyes downcast.

Just then, Alvin tackled Tenko in a hug.

"A-Alvin...?"

"Tenko! Oh, I'm so relieved! You're back now, right? I'm so relieved. I'm so..." She broke off into a sob as she squeezed Tenko tighter.

Sid smiled gently as he watched the two girls hug for a few moments before turning around to fix his gaze on Endea. Her mouth gaped open and closed in surprise, but she said not a word. She very clearly had no idea what just happened.

Finally, she managed to ask, "What...did you do?"

Sid responded calmly, "What do you mean?"



Endea gritted her teeth in frustration and then spat, "Don't play dumb! What did you do to my Tenko?!" Her eyes glowed with enough malevolence to curse the whole world and render everything in it dead. "This is impossible! Why is Tenko back to her former self?! I stabbed her soul with the black sword, even went so far as to use charm magic and was careful to make sure she was fully dyed in darkness. There is absolutely no way she could return from that! She was supposed to have been my loyal servant! So, why, why, why? What did you do to her?!"

Sid responded as casually as if that whole outburst hadn't happened. "It was Saint's Blood."

"Wh-What is that?"

"It's not a very fitting title, me being the Barbarian and all, but I have a spell on me, a blessing of the light god. My blood has the power to purify darkness."

"What? There's no way..."

"That's why I kept letting myself get hit, so Tenko's sword would have my blood on it. It took quite a lot of blood, but eh...I'm used to it."

"Why?" Endea's shoulders shook. She screamed in rage and frustration, "Why? Why, why, why, why, why? I've never even *heard* of that power! Supposing, just for a moment, that this is true, then you must be mad. If you made one little slip up, then you would have died! Was this all a joke to you?!"

"That's none of your business, now is it?" Sid said. He took one step and then another toward Endea. "Just to be clear, I'm livid."

Endea gasped.

"You tried playing games with my apprentice and my lord. You know what you are? You're a nobody. And you're going down." Sid's voice did not display the fury he felt. If anything, he sounded calm. However, a lethal fury simmered in the core of his words.

Endea gulped and stepped back, momentarily overwhelmed by Sid's daunting presence. But then, something seemed to dawn on her, and she burst into shrill laughter.

"What?" she said. "Are you going to attack me? Are you going to try to fight me in your condition?"

Sid made no response.

"Besides, I have the advantage down here in this land where darkness rules. Maybe you should learn your place, scum!"

Endea chanted in Espirish, and the darkness closed in around them. She slid something out from behind her back—a long, thin rapier. Its design breathed ominousness, and its blade was an evil black. Endea chuckled. "What do you think?" she asked. She trailed a

finger up the blade to show it off to Sid. “This is my black fairy sword Twilight...the strongest fairy sword in the world.”

The moment she drew her sword, the temperature in the hall noticeably dropped—lower, lower, past freezing, and still lower. She emitted a wave of freezing shadow as the dark mana rose within her to become a daunting force. Her presence rose to a violent level. The sheer pressure of it could have frozen and crushed an ordinary person from just the sight alone. Even the furthest limits of Tenko’s darkness were no match for Endea’s dark might. The difference between them was absurd.

Endea chuckled. “What a shame for you. It seems most of my power has returned since that battle in the capital. You can’t compete with me any longer.” She sneered, her eyes dark as the deepest trenches of the ocean.

Yet, for all of her smiling, Sid made no response.

Endea laughed at him. “What’s wrong? Are you scared? Are you trembling in your boots?”

Sid made no response.

“If you get down on your knees, lick my shoes clean, and beg, I might just make you one of my servants. Aren’t I so nice?” She cackled.

Just then, the world shook with the roar of thunder, and a flash of lightning cleaved the darkness around them.

“Huh?” cried Endea. Then she was blown into the air. Following the lightning with her eyes, she saw it as a single bolt stretching across the ground like a track with Sid charging along it, his right hand extended and filled with lightning as he leaned forward in a guarding position. These were Sid’s Lightning Legs, but they were now an order of magnitude faster and stronger than the ones he had used on Tenko.

Endea hacked blood as she spun, weightless, in midair. “Huh?” she gasped. “What was that?” She then recalled the moment before the impact. As the lightning bolt had snaked across the ground, Sid had attacked her with his lightning, and her own darkness was powerless to stop it.

Gravity pulled her down until she struck the earth with a loud thud, bounced multiple times, and rolled to a stop. She yelped and sprawled on the ground in an untidy heap. Wincing with pain, she mumbled, “What... What just happened?”

“Is that all you can do?” Still his back to her, Sid turned only his head toward Endea and looked down on her.

“What...did you just say?!”

“I asked if that’s all you can do.”

She shivered, and in that moment, she felt an infinite amount of

fear and dread. “Y-You disrespectful little...” she spluttered. “Who do you think I am?!” As her anger rose, another flood of darkness washed over her. “Do you want to die that badly? Very well, then that’s what you’ll get! I’ll kill you!”

As the darkness rose within her, she lifted her sword and flew at Sid. She twisted through the air and flung herself at him with a frightening, magical speed.

“Die!” she yelled.

There was a flash. Sid transformed into lightning, looped through the room, and then kicked at her again, causing her to go flying. She screamed, and bam! She hit the earth again, and again, and again, smacked into a pillar, and finally stopped.

Lying spread-eagle, she stared up at the ceiling, dazed, and mumbled, “But...why? I used all my power. This can’t be happening.” Endea was already too exhausted and worn out in body, mind, and spirit. In two blows only, Sid had delivered a crushing defeat.

He then landed the finishing blow by saying, “Didn’t you know? It’s part of the knight’s code. A knight’s anger destroys evil.”

Endea stared at Sid in dumb amazement as she lay sprawled on the ground, and once she finally understood the difference in their strength, she trembled.

“You weren’t fighting seriously, were you?” she asked. “You handicapped yourself for Tenko.”

“Well, yeah, of course. She’s my apprentice. What else was I supposed to do? What kind of mentor would I be if I tried to kill her?”

“But why? This has to be a joke...” Endea whined like a little child as she struggled to her feet with the help of her sword. “My black sword is the strongest. Plus, my power’s returned! And you were practically on death’s doorstep! But why, why, why? How come you’re still stronger than me?!”

Then it hit her. It was because he had such power that he was called... “The strongest knight of the legendary era...” she whispered, awestruck.

With a powerful clap of thunder, several lightning bolts snaked over to her and bound her where she stood. Her pride and joy, her black sword, all too easily slipped from her hands and fell to the ground. The lightning burned, and Endea screamed in agony until she almost fainted. It rendered her so immobile she could not move a muscle.

“It hurts!” she cried. “It hurts so much!”

“It’s over for you now, Endea.” Before her eyes, Sid slowly raised his right hand. It crackled with lightning as he adopted a pose to strike her.

Endea wailed and sobbed like a child. “No!” she screamed. “No,

no, no!" She struggled but could not free herself. "No! Stop! I don't want to die again! No!"

Sid said nothing.

"Why?! Why, I ask you? Why doesn't anything ever go my way? It's not fair!"

Ignoring this, Sid advanced on her slowly, readying his aim. He had a certain hunch that Endea was dangerous. Granted, she was far from a threat at the moment, but a darkness far, far deeper than Tenko's lurked in the depths of her heart. He was convinced that before long, if not already, this could grow to cause a major calamity. After all, this was the same girl that the exalted witch Flora called master. There was no doubt in his mind that she was a key figure involved in the dark powers threatening the entire world. That meant he could not let her go free, no matter how cruel it may have seemed. He needed to make sure this ended here. If he completely transformed into lightning and charged at her with his fist, Endea's life would be over. He could end this threat to the future of the world. He crouched low and was on the verge of charging straight at her when—

"You're the Lightning Knight, aren't you? Then why don't you ever come save me?" Endea stared at him with lonely, tear-soaked eyes. She whispered in a voice mixed with sorrow and bitterness, "How come...you only help Alvin?"

Something about this touched Sid's heartstrings. He stiffened, his eyes widening slightly, and gasped. He faltered—no, he stopped attacking altogether.

And the very moment he let his guard down, a ball of black fire bore down on him with a thunderous roar. The eddying flames burned with scorching heat that stretched to the ceiling in a blazing pillar of fire.

Instantly, Sid dropped out of the way of the attack, but when he looked behind him, he saw Endea sobbing in her restraints as a woman hugged her tightly.

"My, my," said a familiar voice. "My poor, adorable little master is in such pain. There, there, my dear." It was the witch.

"Flora?" said Sid. Still focusing his attention ahead of him, he made a quick glance to the side.

"I apologize. I was unable to subdue her." Isabella sank to one knee with a pained expression, wounded and exhausted from the magical battle.

"No, thank you for holding her back this long," Sid said as he returned his eyes to Flora.

"I apologize, Sir Sid," Flora said with a ladylike chuckle. "Where are my manners? I do hope you have been in good health." The smile on her face was composed but unfeeling. "And yet, I must say, sir, it is

a bad knight indeed who treats such a young girl so cruelly.”

“The moment you set foot on the battlefield, the fact that you’re a woman or a child makes no difference.”

“My, my, doesn’t that strike a little too close to home? You speak the truth, good sir.” She giggled as if she found that ever so funny.

“And yet...I do doubt whether or not you could actually kill this young lady with your own hands.”

Sid did not respond.

“I’m sure there is a lot the both of you want to talk about, but...I’m afraid that will have to wait for another time.” She giggled again. “What a shame, truly, that we could not win over Tenko.”

Sid, once again, remained silent.

“Oh, yes, that does remind me. One day, she will be a very important person for the demon kingdom. If you do not let her go to her fate when it comes, then I shall oppose you. What do you think?”

Sid continued to glare at her without a word.

“I shall take your silence as agreeing to a truce,” she said. Then she embraced the sobbing Endea and materialized a Torah-style magic circle at their feet. The two gradually began vanishing into the darkness. Flora must have prepared an escape route for them somewhere along the way. Not only was she the shrewdest witch in the world, but she was devious.

“We shall meet again,” she called as Alvin and the others silently watched her go.

And then, the very moment before Flora and Endea completely vanished into the darkness, a small whisper, one that sounded as if it came up all the way from the depths of hell, crept from Endea’s mouth. “I won’t forgive you.” She raised her drooping head, and as she did, the mask covering the upper half of her face, already loosened by Sid’s attack, slipped and bared her face.

“Huh?!” Alvin cried. “She—she’s...”

“Impossible!” gasped Isabella.

Apart from her eye and hair color, Endea’s face looked identical to Alvin’s.

Tears streaked down Endea’s cheeks as she howled, “I swear I’ll never forgive you, Alvin! How come it’s always you? And now you’re even hogging Sir Sid! I’ll never, ever, ever forgive you! I swear, I’ll get you someday!”

And then, together with Flora, Endea vanished.

Alvin did not know how to respond. She stood stock-still and murmured, “Endea... Who is she? What does she hate me for?”

“I’m curious too. However,” Sid said as he clapped a hand on her head, “she’s not the issue you need to face right now.”

“Huh?” Alvin asked blankly.

Then Isabella yelled, "Tenko! Where are you going?"

Alvin whipped around and saw Tenko walking away silently, her shoulders slumped. "Tenko!" Alvin cried.

Tenko stopped in her tracks. Her small frame shook as she began to whimper, "I'm sorry, Alvin. I...hurt you terribly. What I did was terrible."

Alvin did not respond.

"I have no excuse. I wasn't being controlled... No one told me to do it... I guess it was just...deep down, even in the tiniest bit, it was because I wanted to do it."

Alvin did not respond.

"That's why...I'm no longer fit to be your knight... I'm no longer fit to be with you." Tears flooded both eyes, spilled over, and fell down her cheeks. "So, I'm... I'm leaving you now... I'm going to leave you alone, and...and..." Tenko strained her very hardest to get these painful words out and took another step down into the dark tunnel.

But then, as if with a flip of a switch, Alvin ran up to her from behind and hugged her. "Alvin?" Tenko gasped.

"You don't have to say anything else," Alvin said. "I'm the one who's sorry. I always took it for granted that you'd be here for me... I always made you do things for me...but I never once thought about what you wanted."

Now it was Tenko's turn to fall silent.

"Please, I'm begging you, don't say you're leaving. You don't need to be my knight if you don't want to... Just stay with me. Tenko...please."

Unable to stand it any longer, Tenko whimpered, swung around, and gripped Alvin's hands. "Are you sure?" she asked. "I'm such a coward... I'm weak, and pathetic, and timid...but would you still have me?"



“Don’t say that... Tenko, I don’t want to live without you. If you weren’t here, then I...”

“Alma...” Tenko sobbed.

“Tenko... I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

The two girls cried on and on as they hugged one another. Isabella breathed a sigh of relief as she watched them.

“All’s well that ends well, huh?” said Sid as he glanced over at them before turning away. *But Flora... he thought. Did she plan that?* An ill mood took over his mind. *Her help was so well-timed that she must have prepped for it in advance...and then she had a premade escape route too. She was waiting for me to back Endea into a corner. I bet she also left those traces of darkness when she kidnapped Tenko. In fact, I bet she planned everything...* This was all Flora’s doing. There was no other explanation. Thinking about it, it fit the facts.

But what in the world was she trying to do? And then that girl Endea... No, she can’t be... Tenko’s calamity was over, but this was just the beginning for a whole mountain of other problems. *Nah, it doesn’t matter,* he thought. *I’ll bare my fangs for my lord in this age...and then I’ll drive them away as many times as it takes until they break...or until my life runs out.* He shooed away the jumbled whirl of anxieties clouding his mind and, with a fresh rush of determination, engraved this vow in his soul.

Epilogue

Dazzling sunlight rained down on a clear, beautiful day as the Blitze class students continued their daily training. Once again, they were treading the steep path toward knighthood, but something was a little different.

Two First Squires were running at each other and screaming as their swords crossed in a fierce clash. One was Alvin, and the other was...Tenko.

Tenko moved so quickly that eyes could not track her as she lunged at Alvin. Her Will burned ferociously, sending enormous amounts of mana coursing through her body. As a result, her speed and swordsmanship far surpassed what they were before, now outstripping even Alvin.

“Great job, Tenko!” Alvin called.

“You too, Alvin!” Tenko volleyed back. The girls grinned fearlessly at one another as they swung again and again with intermittent clashes of metal striking metal. Sparks flew from the edges of the swords as they crashed together for the umpteenth time.

Alvin grunted. “In terms of swordsmanship, I’m at a disadvantage...” Unable to keep up with Tenko’s pace, Alvin leaped back to put some space between them. “But what about magic?”

“What?! I-I’d be the one at a disadvantage then...but bring it on!”

Both girls raised their swords and chanted in Espirish before running at each other and yelling.

A whirlwind from Alvin’s sword and a spurt of flame from Tenko’s met head-on with a clash and a swirling explosion.

“Those two are incredible.”

“They really are.”

The other classmates stood frozen in shock as they watched Alvin and Tenko fight.

“T-Tenko’s ability to use her Will has drastically improved ever since that incident, don’t you think?” said Lynette.

“Absolutely,” Elaine said. “Why, she is almost like a whole other person now!”

“Hot damn! I bet we wouldn’t be able to beat her either!” said Christopher.

Theodore made a “hmmph” sound.

Watching the battle fired up the young squires, and with renewed enthusiasm, they vowed to train all the harder. Sid, watching over them from a corner of the training yard, chuckled affectionately.

During the break, Tenko was taking a drink at the water fountain when Sid spoke to her, saying, "Hey. You've been doing pretty good for yourself, haven't you, Tenko?"

"Oh, master!" she cried. Her ears sprang to attention as she lifted her head and whirled around to run over to him. "Yes, oh yes! And, master, it's all because of you!" Her tail wagged back and forth as a smile lit up her entire face. "Thanks to you, I've finally been able to seize my Will, and now I can aim at becoming a knight again."

"Really? That's your choice, huh?"

"It is!"

Indeed, after the incident, Tenko's desires clarified. She wavered no longer, as her feelings were now steady to the core.

"I do!" she said. "I want to be a knight after all! Yes, many awful things have happened to me...but I truly love Alvin, and I want to give her my strength!"

Sid was silent.

"Maybe I'm not cut out for it," she continued. "Maybe someday I'll be dying, broken and bruised, on the battlefield and rue the fact that I am a knight. When I think about that, I'm very scared. But I will never regret the decision itself! That's why—"

Sid interrupted her earnest vow by patting her on the head. Blinking, she looked up at him and asked, "Master?"

"A knight's bravery glimmers in their heart.' You're already an amazing knight," he told her gently.

"M-Master..." Her eyes grew moist with emotion.

"Don't worry," he said as he ruffled her hair. "Here and now, I swear that I will never let any of you die, and I will risk my life to protect you. Also, I will train you guys to be so strong that even if you're killed, you won't die. 'A knight—"

"Speaks only the truth,'" she finished for him.

"You finally get it, huh?" They grinned at each other. "C'mon, let's head back."

"O-Okay!"

Sid turned on his heel and headed back to the training grounds, and Tenko followed suit. However, something occurred to her, and she stopped. She screwed up her face in determination and then yelled at Sid's retreating back. "U-Um... Master!"

"What is it?" He turned his head to look at her. "You need something?"

“U-Um, well...” Blood rushed to her cheeks as he stared at her. The determination she felt a few seconds ago deserted her, and she fidgeted under his gaze. “Th-There’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you ever since...since you rescued me...”

“What, you wanted to thank me? Come on, you’ve done that plenty already. Any more and I’ll be put off by it.”

“No, no, not that! It’s...something completely different!” Her face was already as red as a tomato.

Sid looked confused as she continued. “Ever since I was a kid, I’ve been nothing but a sword, so when I first felt this new emotion, I couldn’t believe what it meant... But, now I know what it is! I mean, I know we’re not even the same species and all, but... And I’m getting ahead of myself because we wouldn’t even be compatible anyway! It’s ridiculous of me to forget my place, since you’re always protecting me all the time, since I’m weak! But, um...”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Um!” Tenko steeled her courage once more, raised her head, and shouted, “Someday... Someday, I’m going to beat you in battle! And when I do, then there’s something I want to tell you. Will you listen to me?!”

Sid looked at her, baffled, as her eyes shone with some unknown emotion. “I mean, sure. Whatever,” he said.

“Do you really mean it? Oh, thank you so much!” She leaped into the air, her face glowing with joy.

“I don’t really get what’s happening, but I mean, if it makes you happy, then that’s awesome,” he said, watching her with a wry grin. “However, I’m warning you...at the rate you’re going, you’ll need another...yeah, a good couple of decades before you succeed.”

Tenko screamed. “Are you serious?!”

He chuckled. “If you don’t like it, then you’d better get serious about training.”

“O-O-Okay! I’ll do my best!” Now she had to do it for sure! Tenko dashed off to the training grounds at full tilt.

Sid watched her go with a chuckle. “Good luck, kid,” he said. “You’ll forge your own path with your blood, sweat, and tears.” He had a warm expression, as if he was seeing something brilliantly, dazzlingly beautiful.

Their long journey had only just begun.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Taro Hitsuji.

Magic Knight of the Old Ways: Volume 2 has successfully made it to print! A big thank you to all my editors, everyone involved in the publication process, and those who bought and read Volume 1.

Now, let's see. What should we talk about this time? Volume 1 raised the question of what makes Alvin a king worthy of the legendary knight Sid's sword. Now, in Volume 2, we ask the question in relation to Tenko—what makes someone a knight?

Even though her fairy sword is low rank, Tenko is noble-minded, serious, proud of being a knight, and uncommonly faithful to Alvin. She's also Alvin's closest friend and is a good, admirable person in how she will always do anything for her. Even back in Volume 1, when Tenko objected to Sid, she did so because she was thinking of Alvin. However, Tenko hides an inner conflict that drops a huge shadow over her knightly qualities. In the end, can Tenko really be a knight? What will she learn from Sid, this grand guiding figure? As the author, I would be honored if you witnessed her determination for yourself. Thank you.

Anyway, let's set that aside for now. I feel like I'm going to get a comment like this any day now: Alvin and Tenko...are basically R*mia and S*tine from your other work *Akashic Records*, right?

Bzzt! Wrong! Wrong, I tell you! I promise, I don't have a thing for blonde and silver-haired girls, and I would never think of these characters as rip-offs from my other work! Girls like this are a necessity, I tell you, a necessity! Listen, okay. It is extremely logical for all heroines to either have golden or silver hair! Silver and gold have been synonymous with beauty and great value for all eternity, so even the mere words can cause one to feel admiration and awe. It's the best way to quickly convey the beauty of these heroines to the readers in this light novel medium! Besides, blonde hair always looks noble, and silver hair has a mystical quality to it. In other words, blonde and silver hair are the only colors that can produce the right tone and provide that great visual contrast in the illustrations. They're very powerful like that!

True, black hair is great too, but there are so many light novels with black-haired protagonists. It's harder to pull off (in my opinion, at any rate) that color contrast than when using blonde and silver hair

for female characters. Does that make sense? These terribly profound reasons are why every main female character in my novels has blonde or silver hair. I simply have no choice.

W-Well, in terms of my personal preferences, it's true that I do like blonde and silver hair... B-But the main thing here is what it adds to the story! I swear! Anyway, now that I've presented my theory on how to craft a well-thought-out female protagonist, let's move on to the advertisements.

I'm proud to announce that the *Magic Knight of the Old Ways* manga will begin serializing in *Monthly Comic Alive*'s September issue! Mr. Yoshihiro Kawabata's wonderfully passionate story is unfolding there. If you like *Old Ways*, then you absolutely must check it out. Also, you can find me on Twitter for status and life updates or to send me your supportive messages and thoughts on my work at @Taro_hitsuji. This little sheep (that's what my surname means) will be very happy to receive them and will do his best moving forward.

With that said, thank you very much, and here's to more *Old Ways*!

Taro Hitsuji









II

Magic Knight of the Old Ways



Taro Hitsuji

Illustrated by

Asagi Tosaka









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Magic Knight of the Old Ways: Volume II

by Taro Hitsuji

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Edited by Drew Fitzgerald

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